Understanding classroom trouble through regulative gravity and instructional elasticity

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A B S T R A C T

This paper aims to develop a more nuanced analytic vocabulary to typify how and where classroom trouble can manifest in pedagogic discourse. It draws on classroom ethnographies conducted in non-academic secondary school pathways and alternative programmes in Australian communities with high youth unemployment, where the policy of 'earning or learning' till age 17 has effectively extended compulsory schooling. Three concepts are developed and exemplified: 'regulative flares', being moments when teachers resort to explicitly reasserting the lesson's social order; 'moral gravity' to describe the degree to which the moral order underpinning the regulative discourse is tied to the immediate context or beyond; and 'instructional elasticity' to account for trouble originating in the instructional register.

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A policy context producing 'reluctant stayers'

In January 2009, all Australian state governments signed a National Education Agreement that sought to raise educational participation rates and attainment in order to foster economic participation. The ensuing Council of Australian Governments' 'Compact with Young Australians' requires young people to complete a Year 10 certification then continue in education, training, or employment until age 17. It also denies them income support or family welfare entitlements till age 21 unless the young person is enrolled in formal education or vocational training. A report on outcomes under this policy by 2012 indicated some progress towards the former goal of increasing educational retention and attainment, but no progress towards the latter goal of greater economic participation, thus calling into the question the promised link between the two:

> More young people (20–24 year olds) have completed Year 12 or equivalent, increasing from 82.8% in 2006 to 85.0% in 2011. Despite this improvement, progress needs to be faster if governments are to reach COAG's target of 90% of young people having attained Year 12 or equivalent by 2015. The proportion of young people (17–24 year olds) fully engaged in work or study following school declined from 73.9% in 2006 to 72.7% in 2011. This was due to a fall in full-time employment which more than offset increases in the rate of young people who were studying full-time (COAG Reform Council, 2013, p. 9)

In the absence of viable employment opportunities, the 'earning or learning' condition in the Compact has produced new kinds of classrooms and curriculum in upper secondary school and in technical and further education (TAFE) colleges as

alternative settings. This is particularly the case in communities with poor youth employment prospects, where students who would previously have left school earlier are now retained in classroom settings till the minimum age of 17.

From Te Riele and Crump (2002) I borrow the category of 'reluctant stayers' to describe students retained under this policy for whom 'school has become a shelter from unemployment' (p. 253). From their work with disengaged youth across mainstream and alternative educational settings, Te Riele and Crump observe: 'common to most of these groups . . . is that their experience of schooling is negative: they do not get on with teachers, they find the curriculum irrelevant or too hard, and they find the school environment unsupportive' (2002, p. 259). Other researchers in similar spaces have observed that 'this is as much a struggle for the schools and teachers as it is for the young people' (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 403). On a larger scale, Thomson (2002) has argued that '"doing discipline" is . . . spatially distributed: rustbelt schools are dealing with keeping (the) social order much more than more privileged schools' (Thomson, 2002, p. 47). In this way, the friction generated between reluctant stayers and the schools made responsible for them under this policy is a burden distributed unevenly across education sectors.

This paper is about the educational experience for this kind of student, in this kind of classroom, in this kind of community, and how their confluence manufactured under this policy serves to concentrate and amplify classroom trouble. I am interested in typifying, exemplifying and unpacking both the moral orders that are invoked in these school and TAFE settings, and the types of trouble that can challenge these moral orders in classroom interactions. The paper builds from Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogic discourse as 'a rule which embeds two discourses: a discourse of skills of various kinds and their relations to each other, and a discourse of social order' (pp. 31–32). The former discourse, which Bernstein terms the 'instructional', is understood to be embedded and reliant on the latter 'regulative' discourse which establishes the social order of the pedagogic relation, and 'expectations about conduct, character and manner' (p. 13). This paper uses this distinction and relation between instructional and regulative discourses to show how trouble can erupt in either dimension of pedagogic discourse.

The paper proceeds in the following stages. A literature review explores the body of empirical work that has probed questions regarding the regulative discourse, which is limited when compared to the substantial body of work focussed on questions of curricular knowledge and language demands in the instructional discourse. A theoretical frame for understanding moral orders and classroom troubles is then developed exploiting first Christie's sociolinguistic translation of Bernsteinian concepts, then the concept of semantic gravity from Freebody, Maton, and Martin (2008). From this mix, the paper develops the concepts of 'regulative flare', 'moral gravity' and 'instructional elasticity'. The empirical project and five case sites are outlined, then slices of observational and interview data are presented to exemplify firstly statements invoking moral orders on different scales, then different types of trouble contesting these moral orders. The conclusion reflects on what is lost and what is gained under moral orders of different gravities, and how these reluctant stayers and their teachers might be better served in this policy environment.

A review of regulative discourse research

While the nature of curricular knowledge and the instructional discourse more generally have been the subject of empirical studies (for example, Beck & Young, 2005; Christie, 1991; Ellis, 2004; Li & Ginsburg, 2001) and theoretical elaboration (for example, Bourne, 2003; Moore & Muller, 2002; Morais, 2002; Tyler, 1999), there has been less empirical attention to, and theoretical elaboration of, the regulative discourse. This section reviews some of the empirical literature resourced by Bernsteinian theory which has foregrounded regulative discourse matters and/or classroom trouble. The review highlights how such enquiries often rely on linguistic realisations for empirical access to the moral order, and point to the ever-present potential for trouble.

Alexander's (2001) vast and rigorous ethnographic study comparing primary education across five nations was premised on Bernstein's understanding of pedagogy as a 'cultural relay' (Bernstein quoted in Alexander, 2001, p. 562). It captured the deep cultural and historical legacies influencing classroom practices, and the cultural politics around what constituted 'good' pedagogic practice in each setting. To understand the moral order underpinning such different settings, he first distinguished between 'routine' (unvarying habituated procedure that can be taken for granted), 'rule' (in its weak version, a routine that is required rather than sustained by habit; in its strong version, a regulation that is enforced through sanctions), and 'ritual' (prescribed ceremonial practice), each 'fundamental to the culture of the classroom and the work of schools' (p. 380). In combination, 'they are the cement which binds together the otherwise anarchic combination of one adult and 15 or 50 children' (p. 381). Across contexts, Alexander noted the explicit work teachers undertake to establish routines when faced with a new class, the particular attention paid to rules governing classroom talk, and how time serves as the 'preeminent regulator of pedagogy' (p. 384). From the empirical analysis, he extracted six categories of rules/routines/ritual: 'temporal, procedural, behavioural, interactive, linguistic and curricular' (p. 384). Using this typology cross-tabulated with the rule/routine/ritual categories, he could contrast the nature of the regulative discourse across the national settings as follows:

> A high degree of consistency and predictability in the lessons was observed in Russia, France and India was associated with clear and internalised routines which once established were rarely referred to again. The Russian and Indian classrooms, especially the latter, displayed practices which were highly ritualized. In contrast, matters were much more up for negotiation in the English and Michigan classrooms. However, the differences related not only to the