Weathering moral micro-climates in extended compulsory education

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In 2009, a constellation of Australia-wide social policies effectively extended compulsory schooling so that students must be ‘earning or learning’ till 17 years of age. This ‘edufare’ solution to youth unemployment has served to pool academic and socioeconomic disadvantage, creating challenging classrooms in poorly resourced schools and colleges servicing disadvantaged communities. This paper will draw from an empirical study that sought to understand the moral order operating in these settings. The project design involved classroom ethnographies in eight ‘prevocational’ classrooms for 16-17 year olds sampled in high schools and TAFE colleges across three towns experiencing high youth unemployment. This paper builds from Durkheim's (1925/1961) formative arguments around the moral work of mass schooling and Bernstein's (1990, 2000) concept of the regulative discourse to analyse the different moral forces and frames that are invoked and contested in classrooms for youth retained in compulsory schooling under this policy. A concept of regulative flares is developed to describe empirical moments where lessons are interrupted to explicitly address and reassert behavioural expectations for student conduct. Then a variable of moral gravity is developed to conceptualise different types of moral frames that can be invoked or transgressed in these flares. These range from the strongest gravity in highly contextualised expectations derived from interpersonal relations, to the weakest gravity of universal, decontextualized moral precepts. Between these poles are frames that reference the particular classroom context, the school/college institutional context, or broader settings such as the workplace as legitimating frames for moral expectations. Using this theoretical vocabulary, the micro-climates of different teacher/class combinations, as evidenced in the moral gravity of their observed regulative flares, can be analysed, typified and contrasted.

This paper will then use the theoretical vocabulary to describe the contours and dynamics of moral gravity constructed in sequences of moves made by different teachers as they directed, corrected, cajoled, negotiated or battled with students over time. Teachers are shown to move up and down the moral gravity scale, sometimes appealing to individual students, and at other times, invoking the moral power of the institution and beyond. This analysis allows the conclusion to reflect on the moral micro-climates students must weather, and the relevance of these constraints to the social project of making moral citizens of these students on the brink of entering the workforce and adult society.