

# The Micropolitics of Educational Change

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*This chapter by Joe Blase, focuses on the micropolitics of educational change, an emerging area of educational inquiry. After a brief review of the relevant theoretical literature, the micropolitics of stability and change is discussed. Selected general studies are described to illustrate the pervasiveness of micropolitics to life in schools. Micropolitical studies of 1980s and 1990s reform and general studies of 1990s school reform/restructuring are then reviewed. This review is used to demonstrate the central thesis of the chapter: Micropolitics is a fundamental dimension of school change in general and, as such, a chief target of most approaches to school restructuring. A framework of ideas for further research on the micropolitics of change in schools is described. Such research is needed because few direct studies of this important phenomenon actually exist.*

Schools and school systems are political organizations in which power is an organizing feature. Ignore [power] relationships, leave unexamined their rationale, and the existing system will defeat efforts at reform. This will happen not because there is a grand conspiracy or because of mulish stubbornness in resisting change or because educators are uniquely unimaginative or uncreative (which they are not) but rather because recognizing and trying to change power relationships, especially in complicated, traditional institutions, is among the most complex tasks human beings can undertake.

Seymour Sarason, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*  
(1990, p. 7)

The micropolitical perspective on organizations directly challenges traditional (consensus) models of organization developed by such theorists as Weber (1947) and Taylor (1947). Burns (1961) was among the early theorists to discuss organizations as political systems consisting of both cooperative and conflictive elements; he argued that political alliances and political obligations were the "exchange currency" of organizational behavior.

Although Iannaccone (1975) first introduced the notion of micropolitics to education in the mid 1970s, it was not until the late 1980s that scholars produced significant theoretical and empirical work. Ball (1987), Bacharach and Mitchell (1987), Blase (1987a), and Hoyle (1986) were early pioneers in this new area of educational inquiry. Bacharach and Lawler (1980) constructed a political perspective on school organization that emphasized group-level analysis, bargaining relationships and tactics, and conflict in the context of formal decision making.

Ball's (1987) political perspective on schools, drawn from studies of British schools, also stressed group-level interactions: the interests of stakeholders, the maintenance of control by school heads (principals), and conflicts over decision making and school policy. Ball also discussed the politics of gender, race, age, and change.

Parallel theoretical work on schools as organizations, indirectly underscored the salience of micropolitics to everyday life in schools. Representative examples in this area include loose coupling theory (Weick, 1976), negotiated order theory (Hall & Spencer-Hall, 1982), and the interacting spheres model (Hanson, 1976) as well as intensive case studies of educational settings by Waller (1932), Beale (1936), Becker (1980), Lortie (1975), and Cusick (1983), among others. Such work pointed to the centrality of power and influence, value and goal diversity, and cooperative and conflictive processes in school organization. Indeed, like emerging micropolitical work in the area of education, such related work also suggested a view of organization that stressed the interactive, dialectical, strategic, ideological, interpretive, and conflictive/cooperative aspects of school life.

Researchers such as Ball (1987), Bacharach and Mitchell (1987), Blase (1987a, 1987b, and 1991), and Hoyle (1986) made important contributions to understanding the micropolitics of schools. However, most work has emphasized (a) conflictive "dark side" politics, (b) group-level behavior, and (c) formal decision-making processes. To address these limitations, Blase (1991) constructed an inclusive definition of micropolitics from the extant literature:

Micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations. In large part political actions result from perceived differences between individuals and groups, coupled with the motivation to use power to influence and/or protect. Although such actions are consciously motivated, any action, consciously or unconsciously motivated, may have political "significance" in a given situation. Both cooperative and conflictive actions and processes are part of the realm of micropolitics. (p. 11)

Among other things, this definition of micropolitics addresses all types of decision-making structures and processes in school settings: conflictive and cooperative-consensual, group-level and individual, and formal and informal. It treats overt behavior as well as subtle and submerged processes (e.g., socialization) and structures (e.g., policies and procedures) as political phenomena. Blase's (1991) perspective on micropolitics is especially relevant to understanding school restructuring designed to create participatory governance structures (e.g., shared governance, site-based management, team leadership, teacher empowerment). School restructuring is driven by both conflictive-adversarial ("power over") and cooperative-consensual ("power with") political processes despite the participatory/democratic rhetoric stressing the latter (Fullan, 1991; Kreisberg, 1992; Malen & Ogawa, 1988). Kreisberg (1992) has observed that "the history of consensual decision-making in organizations is littered with power struggles [and] dissensus" (p. 124). Power-with political interaction focuses on mutual empowerment through a process characterized by reciprocity, co-agency, negotiation, and sharing to