

# researchsnapshot

## Conflict Amid Community: The Micropolitics of Teacher Collaboration



**Source of Research:** Achinstein, B. (2002). *Teachers College Record*. 104(3), 421-455.

### What is this research about?

Building on case studies from two middle schools, the researcher sought to understand the role of conflict in sustaining learning communities over time. This study demonstrates how communities navigate disagreements in vastly different ways and how this impacts the communities' capacity for organizational learning. The cases reveal that when communities engage in productive conflict (as opposed to those where differences are suppressed) they have a "greater potential for continual growth and renewal" (p. 448).

### What did the researchers do?

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the researcher explored how each school community approached conflict and what outcomes resulted. Data was collected through four primary means including interviews, surveys, observation, and document analysis.

The author situated the study in a micropolitical perspective suggesting that micropolitical theory offered a "new lens for understanding collaborative reforms in schools by uncovering power, influence, conflict, and negotiating processes between individuals and groups within school organizations" (p. 423). Micropolitics was defined as "the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations" (p. 423). The author noted that "practitioners who understand the micropolitics of collaboration may also be less alarmed when conflicts do arise, learn to navigate them in more overt ways, and more explicitly discuss the kinds of communities they want to maintain" (p. 450).

### What you need to know...

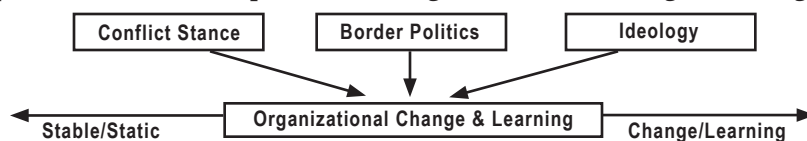
The researcher outlined a spectrum of micropolitical processes associated with conflict in teacher communities and argued that "the processes of conflict are critical to understanding what distinguishes a professional community that maintains stability and the status quo from a community engaged in ongoing inquiry and change" (p. 446). These processes included:

- Conflict Stance** - the community's processes to negotiate conflict among its members ranging from *avoidant* to *embracing*.
- Border Politics** - borders delineate inclusively and permeability, both within the boundaries of the community and in relation to those outside ranging from *unified and exclusive* to *diverse and inclusive*.
- Ideology** - ideological values held by members of the community and the degree to which internal school ideology is consistent with macro-level ideology ranging from *mainstream and congruent* to *critical and counter*.

In the cases in this study, these processes played an essential role in organizational change and learning. "In one case these processes offered a kind of learning for inquiry and ongoing renewal through challenging deeply taken-for-granted norms, whereas the other case showed how the community used these processes to maintain harmony and the status quo" (p. 446).

### What did the researchers find?

How learning communities managed, navigated and responded to these processes defined the potential for organizational learning and change.



The researchers noted that "critically reflecting on conflicts within the school enables the potential for the kind of organizational learning and change advocated by reformers. An embracing stance towards conflict involves a community in an inquiry process that explores divergent beliefs and practices of the community, acknowledges and owns responsibility for conflicts that may result, opens the borders to diverse members and perspectives, and, at times, questions the organization's premise to change them" (p. 447).

The author suggested that mechanisms for openly raising and addressing conflicts (e.g., school-wide consensus decision-making protocols, and critical reflection protocols) be put in place in teacher communities.