

Executive Summary

Conflict Amid Community: The Micropolitics of Teacher Collaboration

by Betty Achinstein — 2002

A major reform surge that began in the mid-1980s has generated a renewed interest in fostering teacher community or collaboration as a means to counter isolation, improve teacher practice and student learning, build a common vision for schooling, and foster collective action around school reform. A teacher professional community can be defined as a group of people across a school who are engaged in common work; share to a certain degree a set of values, norms, and orientations towards teaching, students, and schooling; and operate collaboratively with structures that foster interdependence. Challenging the individualism and isolation of the dominant school work culture, past research on teacher professional communities has often cast a picture of communities rapidly able to achieve consensus, at times undervaluing the complexities involved in managing diversity of beliefs and practice while maintaining strong communities. Although more recent studies have begun to explore more of the complexities of difference amid community, the policy and practice enacted from the research on community often does not capture these nuances, instead offering a simplified and overly optimistic vision of collaborative reforms.

Yet, in practice, when teachers collaborate they run headlong into enormous conflicts over professional beliefs and practices. Communities are often born in conflict because they demand substantial change in school norms and practices, challenging existing norms of privacy, independence, and professional autonomy, and may question existing boundaries between cultures and power groups at school sites. They remain in conflict as their valued norms of consensus and critical reflection, of unity and discord, are oftentimes incompatible. Yet advocates often underplay the role of diversity, dissent, and disagreement in community life, leaving practitioners ill-prepared and conceptions of collaboration underexplored. An understanding of conflict within community is crucial to practitioners', reformers', and researchers' understanding of how such communities form, cope, and are sustained over time.

This article draws on micropolitical and organizational theory to examine teacher communities. In particular, it highlights experiences with conflict, border politics, and ideology. These three concepts describe the

micropolitical activity of teachers as they negotiate differences among colleagues, define which ideas and members belong to their community, and make meaning of their shared framework of values in relation to their school context. These three proved to be critical dimensions that impacted the nature of organizational learning—that is, how organizations make meaning and learn from past events by adapting or transforming norms and practices.

This article examines examples from a study of two school-wide teacher professional communities located in urban public middle schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that are engaged in collaborative reform initiatives. The study explored how each community approached conflict between teachers and what outcomes resulted. I chose a case study approach using ethnographic techniques to emphasize richly contextualized data to get at often hidden processes. I combined both qualitative and quantitative methods. Although I conducted research at one site for more than 4 years (intensively examining conflict for 2 academic years), I studied the second site intensively for 1 academic year. I collected data through four primary means: ongoing interviews with approximately 50 teachers and administrators; observations of formal and informal meetings and interactions; document analysis of current and archival documents; and a teacher survey. The article draws from two representative case study vignettes, which describe the school and teacher community and then highlight a story of a teacher conflict about how to meet the needs of their diverse student population. These vignettes reveal the dramatic differences between the two case schools.

Using examples from the vignettes, this article shows that when teachers enact collaborative reforms in the name of community, what emerges is often conflict.

These cases reveal that community and conflict formed an unexpected marriage. Collaboration and consensus—critical elements that build community—actually generated conflict. Not only did the teacher professional communities experience multiple conflicts, but also the core norms and practices of collaboration that define teacher communities promoted the conflicts.

Through this research and a review of the literature, I developed a continuum of micropolitical processes associated with conflict within teacher communities. The cases helped bring to light a continuum that demonstrates variation in how communities manage conflicts, negotiate borders, and define ideologies. Ultimately, exploring the spectrum of each dimension of the continuum helps reveal processes that shape different kinds of organizational learning within schools.

The continuum depicts a range of conflict stances. At one end of the spectrum lies an avoidant stance, identifying a community's ability to rapidly absorb, exclude, or transfer conflicts and thus maintain a unified community and stable school environment. At the other end of the spectrum sits an embracing stance, which involves a community acknowledging and critically reflecting on their differences of belief and practice in efforts to foster fundamental change in the school.

The responses to conflict expose and shape border politics as communities negotiate membership and acceptable beliefs. Borders delineate inclusivity and permeability, both within the boundaries of the community and in relation to those outside, such as students or parents. The two cases illustrate contrasting kinds of border politics that result in exclusive and inclusive boundaries for their communities, thus demonstrating points along a continuum of border negotiation.

How come one community tended to avoid while the other embraced conflicts? Micropolitical processes are not separable from the ideologies already present and working within and beyond the schoolhouse walls. The content of such ideologies, and the relationship between the macro-level and the internal school ideology, shapes how conflict is received and managed. Any given teacher community could hold ideological values that are in concert with or in opposition to macro-level messages, thereby increasing or decreasing levels of conflict experienced among the teachers. Thus the degree of consistency in ideological stances between micro and macro ideologies influences the nature of the micropolitical processes associated with conflict. The continuum depicts an ideological spectrum from mainstream conceptions about schooling for socialization that are congruent with dominant messages from the environment to critical conceptions of schooling for transformation of society that conflict with local and national messages. Ideologies of schooling shaped contrasting experiences in the two cases.

Of all the aspects of a teacher community, why focus in on conflict, border politics, and ideology? The kinds of organizational learning purported to result from building community among teachers are deeply linked to how they manage the differences amid their collaboration. 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. In the cases, the micropolitical processes played an essential role in organizational learning that impacted structures, reform efforts, norms, and the whole school community. In one case these processes fostered 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.

These cases thus reveal an important lesson: Communities that can productively engage in conflict, rather than those with low levels of conflict, have a greater potential for continual growth and renewal. The very communities currently highlighted as successful by the literature because of high levels of consensus may not be as generative or capable of organizational learning for fundamental change as other more conflict-ridden ones. Critically reflecting on conflicts enables the potential for the kind of organizational learning and change advocated by reformers. An embracing stance toward conflict involves a community in an inquiry process that explores divergent beliefs and practices; acknowledges and owns responsibilities for conflicts that may result; opens the borders to diverse members and perspectives; and, at times, questions the organization's premises to change them.

This study suggests that counter to the consensus-based literature on teacher community, teachers engaged in community building generate and at times thrive on conflict and dissent. Thus, it is time to reframe notions of conflict amid community. To engage in conflict and question one's beliefs with the possibility of deep change is fundamentally a positive and hopeful act rather than a problematic one within community. If conflict processes are a natural, inevitable, and at times fruitful part of teacher professional communities, then conflict talk, deliberation about ideology, border negotiations, dissent, and disagreements over practices can no longer only be relegated to the domain of unprofessional or dysfunctional.

The three concepts of conflict, border politics, and ideology drawn from micropolitical and organizational theory offer a way to explore phenomenon inherent in collaborative reforms. Research should no longer ignore or pathologize these micropolitical processes but explore them. Policy makers should reconsider naive initiatives that put teachers in groups and expect them to learn and grow, disregarding the complexity of the collaborative process and the time needed to navigate differences. Practitioners who understand the micropolitics of collaboration also may 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.