Towards a broader understanding of the micropolitics of educational change

VENITHA PILLAY

VENITHA PILLAY is senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education. Her research interests include higher education transformation and feminist research methodologies.

Abstract

This article seeks to understand the effects of educational change on the people in the change environment through a focus on the micropolitics of change. The views of individuals involved in a specific restructuring process are examined within the context of the current literature on the micropolitics of educational change.

Introduction

In a country that has been beset with educational change initiatives in the last decade it is surprising that little has been written about the effects of such changes on an arena that, arguably, is the most deeply affected by educational change. I refer here to the 'on the ground' education practitioners whose lives inevitably are thrown into turmoil and confusion by far-reaching change measures. While this article offers some empirical insight into the experiences of education tertiary practitioners in a change environment, its focus is on seeking conceptual pathways in which to understand the effects of change on the people in the change environment. In interrogating the concept of the micropolitics of educational change, this article offers a way of understanding such effects. It examines briefly, with the aim of exemplifying the themes raised in the literature on the micropolitics of education change, some of the views expressed by individuals involved in a specific major restructuring process, namely the incorporation of a college of education into a university.

A note on method

The discussion in this article is rooted in a larger case study for a doctoral degree. The empirical research for the doctoral study was extensive but the article draws only on relevant aspects of the data. For instance interviews of the staff at the university involved are not referred to as they were

1 For details of the study refer to unpublished doctoral thesis: Soobrayan, V. 2003. Transformation or travesty? A study of the micropolitics of educational change in the case of the incorporation of a college of education into a university. (The author was formerly known as Venitha Soobrayan.)

2 A total of eighty-one interviews were conducted.
in the main relatively unaffected by the incorporation. The views of respondents were cited for the purpose of reinforcing or refuting the existing literature on the micropolitics of educational change. For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used, where appropriate, in referring to respondents. In addition, I have tried not to reveal the identity of the institutions involved.

The education college referred to was a distance education provider. This meant that there were no students on the campus and they therefore had limited opportunity to shape the micropolitics of the incorporation process. The college was itself an outcome of a previous merger between two education colleges, one from a formerly white and the other from a formerly black department of education. The students of the merged college were overwhelmingly black whereas the staff was racially mixed. However, the majority of senior academic and administrative posts were held by white staff, and black staff occupied the lower ranking posts.

Developing an understanding of micropolitics and educational change

Despite its limitation to the school, the following description of micropolitics by Ball and Bowe (1991) may also offer a useful frame against which the current literature on micropolitics and educational change may be examined.

Micropolitics provides a conceptual frame for the analysis of both the processes and outcomes of school reform. The nature of the school as an organization and the realities of organizational change are the outcomes of traceable micropolitical processes. These outcomes are not unconstrained, but neither are they predetermined (44).

In the literature on micropolitics in an education change environment, I have identified three themes that I found to be recurrent. They are:

• Micropolitics is inevitably entwined with power and leadership.
• Micropolitics is necessarily a study of conflict.
• Micropolitics is part of the darker side of institutional life.

However these themes are not seen as distinct and separate issues. They are interrelated and have no precise boundaries.

Micropolitics is entwined with power and leadership

Innaccone (1991), who is widely acknowledged among micropolitics theorists to be the first education academic to identify and describe the study of micropolitics of education, is perhaps also one of the few micropolitics theorists who does not focus on power as an inevitable element of micropolitical activity. In his article ‘Micropolitics of education: what and why’, he reiterates his definition of the micropolitics of education that he offered in 1975.

The micropolitics of education is concerned with the interaction and political ideologies of social systems of teachers, administrators and pupils within a school building. These may be labelled as internal organizational subsystems. It is also concerned with the issues of the interaction between professional and lay subsystems. They may be called the external systems. These are the referents of the concept ‘microeducational politics’ as used here’ (466).

What is notable about Innaccone’s definition is that, despite its limitation to the school as the area of applicability, it is a broad definition that attempts to encompass many of the players involved in this site. The micropolitical terrain is not dominated by any particular group. The

---

3 The black and white education departments formed part of the apartheid education landscape.
nature of the micropolitical activity is described simply as an "interaction" shaped by political ideologies. While I do not wish to depoliticise the study of micropolitics, I suggest that "political ideologies", despite being a dominant motivating force, are not the only factors that influence micropolitical actions. As I shall show in the course of this article, issues of leadership, organisational goals and objectives are some of the factors that could shape the micropolitical environment.

Blase states that "micropolitics refers to the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goal in organisations" (1998, 545). Indeed he makes the observation that "central to all perspectives on micropolitics is the use of power to achieving goals in organizational settings" (1991c, 185). Corbett suggests that power is "associated with altering the behaviour of others" and that "power exists only where there are opportunities to exercise influence on others" (1991, 74). Admittedly, he does make the point that "lower participants can and do wield considerable influence over peers and superordinates alike" but then goes on to say this is a "seldom studied phenomenon" (1991, 75).

Given that power is inevitably unevenly distributed in any hierarchical social organisation, it stands to reason that those with more power will have greater potential to engage in micropolitical activity. It is also feasible that those in power will have more potential to influence those who are not. While I accept that power is frequently an aspect of micropolitical activity, I believe that the lack of power may potentially be an equally important variable in the micropolitical spectrum. It would seem that the ordinary staff, that is, those not involved in the management of the incorporated college, had no power and therefore no means of engaging in micropolitical activity. The validity of this claim may be contestable, given the intense discussion on organisational decisions that occur among 'ordinary' staff. I suggest that an arena of such intense activity cannot be dismissed or made incidental just because it is not perceived as an arena where traditional power resides. In the case studied, experiences of power and powerlessness appeared to reside alongside each other. Ironically, a woman in a senior management post in the college made the following comment which illustrated her sense of powerlessness.

No matter how much we speculate things are not going to change. What is going to happen will happen. But I've also learnt that what you hear and what happens are two different things (Gabriella).

A contrasting view was held by her colleague lower down in the hierarchy of the college. He decided that because his fate was no longer in his hands, he would use his individual power to cause as much instability as was possible. He said that he deliberately spread rumours about the incorporation among his colleagues to make them feel insecure. He indicated that he sat back and watched the effects of his rumours, hinting that he quite enjoyed this. Indeed he was also convinced that his colleagues did the same and that such malicious intent was common.

I feel like I am forced out. But I want to make this world a bit heavy too before I go. I believe with everyone else it is the same thing. You spread the rumours deliberately (Jack).

An issue related to the concept of power and micropolitics therefore, is that power is used to influence. This may be obviously applicable to those who do wield some form of power. However, it is apparent from the views expressed by Jack, that the power to influence, whether successful or not, may be exerted in varying ways across an institutional hierarchy.

My contention is that the micropolitics of the educational site is not limited to the centralised use of power as the existing literature implies. I am not certain whether this limitation has developed by virtue of the bias found in empirical studies of the micropolitics of school leadership (Cilo, 1994; Lindle, 1999; Bishop & Mulford 1999; West, 1999), or whether the limitations of definitions offered since Innaccone's 1975 definition (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991a,b,d, 1993, 1998; Corbett, 1991; Hoyle, 1986) are responsible for researchers choosing to focus on leadership. I suggest that
issues of power in micropolitical studies should include unanticipated arenas of power. An automatic association between micropolitics and power might render invisible the micropolitics at play in arenas not traditionally associated with power. While I do not contest the dominance of various forms of power in the micropolitical terrain, I suggest that all strata of a social organisation need to be explored in order to understand more comprehensively the micropolitical process within the institution. An association with power also begs the question as to what possible micropolitical actions, if any, may be undertaken by those who are seemingly powerless, as Jack's actions seem to suggest.

Emerging from the above analysis of power in the micropolitical terrain is the presence of silence as an expression of micropolitics. In the study referred to the silence of major players on key questions regarding the process had a notable impact on the way in which the process unfolded. The silence of the provincial education authority with respect to the future of the college staff, the silence from senior officials toward junior officials, the silence of the university with respect to the possible employment of college staff and the silence of the Rector of the college and of the national Department of Education echoed through this process. The pain caused by such silence was evident in the comments of some respondents.

Tell us from the beginning what is going to happen to us, tell us where we are going, how it is going to happen … because once I know where I am going it stops all the uncertainty and speculation. And all the heartache (Gabriella).

Sometimes I get the feeling that they just did not care. … Now it is the middle of November and you still don’t know what is going to happen to you. And that makes me realise that we must get the message to get out of the system (Megan).

The National Department of Education knew the answers to the questions about what was going to happen. I think they knew but did not want to tell us. … They started to drag things out (Paul).

The silence was also interpreted to be deliberate and a means to force lecturers to resign because they were uncertain of their future.

The [provincial department of education] stalled and delayed the process so that people would leave the system on their own. One almost got the impression that at certain stages that from the [provincial department of education] side that feeding people bits and pieces, most people were under so much pressure that they then opted for other alternatives. In other words they didn't have to face the music in the end. So the people opted out (Johannes).

That the silence was heard and interpreted in other ways was also evident. For example, the university's silence was interpreted by the college as a sign of contempt towards college staff, and the silence of the National Department of Education was understood by the college and the provincial education authority to be a means of relinquishing its responsibilities. In other words what the study adds to the existing illustrations of micropolitics, is that silence is a form of micropolitical expression. Indeed, silence can constitute an expression of power as individuals in the college believed that the silence of the university was an expression of its power in the process.

A final issue related to power and micropolitics is the assumption that micropolitical activity is always goal-directed. It seems to me that such a perception may find a comfortable theoretical home within a rationalist theoretical framework. A rationalist approach to understanding an education site would assume that the organisation is highly structured, that all decisions are made formally within the boundaries of prescribed structures and that the education site functions in a linear, logical way. Any education researcher or educationist will verify that this is not what happens at
Perspectives in Education, Volume 22(4), December 2004

an education site, "... [T]he daily reality of high school administration does not mesh with neat, rational, academic theories of management" (Cilo, 1994, 90). Ironically, Noblit in Cilo (1994) hints at the possibility that the emergence of micropolitics as a field of educational study may have been propelled by a reaction to rationalist and positivist approaches to educational change. Blase also makes the point that "the micropolitical perspective represents a radical departure from traditional-rational approaches to organization" (1991b, 2). Given this formative history of micropolitics, it may be argued that an insistence on goal-directedness in micropolitical activity is tantamount to micropolitical theory shooting itself in the foot.

An issue raised by Bacharach and Mundell that deserves attention here is that of the implicit correlational association between goals and actions within an organisation (1993, 423). They suggest that micropolitical analysis "must be clear about what is being struggled over"; "must specify either the organizational, individual, or group unit of analysis"; "must define the dimensions of power used in micropolitical activity", "must precisely and concisely identify the relevant micropolitical actors" and finally "micropolitical analysis must specify the relevant strategies used by these actors" (1993, 433). In a situation of intense conflict and individual aspirations alongside institutional goals, it is feasible that numerous goals would infuse the change environment thus defeating the idea of clearly identifiable goals. Furthermore, I have shown earlier that an understanding of micropolitics and its possible impact on outcomes necessitates an unpacking and interrogation of the conceptualisations of power. Bacharach and Mundell (1993) do not recognise this and indeed their article seems to rest on traditional notions of forms of power. For example, one explication of power that they advance is that of bureaucratic power and its micropolitics. They also refer in detail to the power vested in forms of institutional authority. They do not, however, recognise how power can be exercised by the withdrawal, as the absence of action on the part of the national Department of Education was perceived, or the power that those not in authority may attempt to appropriate.

Micropolitics is inevitably linked to conflict

Having conducted his research during a period of school reform in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, Ball essentialises the link between micropolitics and conflict. In reviewing Ball's (1987) text, Townsend (1990) pertinently asks "Is the micropolitics of schools mostly shorthand for teachers living with the anguish of conflict?" (1990, 213). Ball himself makes the point that his theory is "data-led" and incomplete (1987, viii). Ball's study may be commended for adopting the lens of the teacher unlike the large number of subsequent studies that focus on leadership. However, Ball does not adequately recognise that conflict may be essential to reform without necessarily being essential to micropolitical activity.

That cooperation may be part of the micropolitical terrain is addressed by, among others, Blase (1991a), Greenfield (1991) and Hargreaves (1991). In distinguishing between contrived collegiality and voluntary collegiality, Hargreaves argues that it is possible for cooperation and voluntary collegiality to be part of the micropolitical terrain of an education organisation. Greenfield bases his understanding of cooperation on his research on the leadership style of a particular school principal. He points out that the said principal was led by "a reliance on moral beliefs as [a] source(s) of power to influence teachers" (1991, 63). The limitations of this study, however, are the link between cooperation and moral leadership. The undertone is that moral leadership and cooperation are interdependent. The question that arises is what would happen in a culturally complex institution with varying moral positions on the purpose of teaching. It seems to me that the scope for cooperation should not be theoretically defined by illustrations of less conflictive situations. Perhaps the dominance of 'conflict theory' in micropolitical studies is reflected in Marshall's (1991) study. In this study the relationship between new administrators and teachers was explored. She found that there was a stark absence of conflict between these two groups. In
the conclusion to her study she hypothesises that respondents could have hidden their true feelings, in effect, lied and therefore distorted her findings. What she does not address is the validity of an empirical study being underpinned by the expectation of conflict.

In Marshall's study significant instances of cooperation emerged, such cooperation being read by some to be a consequence of the incorporation process and which existed alongside equally significant issues of conflict among the staff. That staff exercised some level of choice, in how they related to the incorporation process was evident from these contrasting realities. While Jack saw the need to take down with him as many individuals as he could others chose to facilitate the process in positive ways.

The process brought out the good will of the staff.

… The process made people look ahead. … Staff as a stakeholder group did the NPDE⁴, acted with integrity, worked hard, giving of their best because it was part of their professional development (Senior Vice Rector of the college).

Staff maintained a sense of humour and loyalty to their work (Academic Vice Rector of the college).

In developing his understandings of micropolitics Blase (1991b) makes the point that micropolitics is also "about cooperation and how people build support among themselves to achieve their ends" (1991b, 1). Mawhinney (1991b) too notes the "predominance of conflict rather than consensus in micropolitical studies" (1991b, 59). I endorse his suggestion that the "conceptual dimensions of micropolitical analysis" need to be clarified (1991b, 159). In order to facilitate this I contend that it is important to understand the scope of conflictive and cooperative actions within the micropolitical terrain. Marshall (1991) points out that micropolitics may be seen as "the avoidance of conflict" (italics in text) because educators tend to "privatize conflicts", and this should also be factored into the conflict/consensus debate on the nature of micropolitics (1991, 143).

**Micropolitics is part of the darker side of institutional life**

Closely related to the above two themes evident in micropolitical theory, is the notion that micropolitics is part of the underhand, darker side of institutional life. This view is given much attention in Hoyle's (1986) work, which states that talk about the micropolitics of institutional life is more likely to find a home in the bar than within the institution itself.

Micropolitics is best perceived as a continuum, one end of which it is virtually indistinguishable from conventional management procedures but from which it diverges on a number of dimensions – interests, interest sets, strategies and legitimacy – to the point where it constitutes almost a separate organisational world of illegitimate, self-interested manipulation (126).

He concludes that micropolitics is a neglected area of study because "the area is so sensitive that data are difficult to obtain" (130). Short of training as a secret agent, it seems that Hoyle's understanding of micropolitics implies that the education researcher has little chance of conducting a valid micropolitical study of an education institution. Nevertheless, he identifies four common micropolitical strategies: dividing and ruling; co-optation; displacement; controlling information and controlling meetings (1986). It is self-evident that all these strategies are negative and imply that a level of insidiousness is integral to micropolitics. It is heartening to note that in a later article he discusses management micropolitics without making reference to the 'dark' nature of micropolitics. He says that management micropolitics is the strategy used by school leaders and teachers to "pursue their interests in the context of the management of the school" (Hoyle E, 1999, 213). Unfortunately, within this definition, management micropolitics is subjected to a rationalist

---

⁴ National Professional Diploma in Education.
framework in which strategies are planned and implemented. Perhaps this an inverted echo of his view that there is another micropolitical arena altogether – one that is covert and underhand.

Subsequently researchers have made notable efforts to describe the positive nature of micropolitics. Judy Bennett (1999) is a principal in an Australian school and writes of her understanding of micropolitics. Understandably, she limits her comments to those of micropolitics and leadership but makes the valuable observation that "micropolitics can and should be a positive force in schools. Change occurs when there is a good micropolitical climate, that is, when people can work together collegially" (1999, 199). The collegiality perspective is also taken up by Hargreaves (1991) who details the possible positive effects of voluntary collegiality. Barbara Vann, principal of a school in the United Kingdom, also says that micropolitics can have "a positive outcome" (1999, 202). However, she imposes a limitation on the possibility of positive outcomes by saying that strong identification with the school by all its stakeholders means that it then will be "difficult for micropolitics to function in anything other than a positive fashion" (1999, 202). Although I am wary of this limitation, I accept the basic tenet of Bennett's (1999) and Vann's (1999) views – that it is indeed possible for micropolitics to be understood positively and not simply as manipulative and underhand.

In the context of the positive/negative perceptions of micropolitics I would like to draw on Marshall's (1991) point that political actions within the school are part of the "routine" of school life. She quotes Innaccone who describes political acts in schools as the "quiescent political processes of day-to-day allocation of stakes [which] are largely routine" (1991, 143). Blase (1991d) and West (1999), in making a recommendation that teacher training should include an awareness of the micropolitical forces at play in the education context, also recognise the everyday and routine nature of micropolitics and education.

Caveats in the literature
I have found that a neglected aspect of the study of micropolitics and educational change has been the interplay between the cultures of an institution and micropolitical activity within the institution. Hargreaves (1991) points out that

[d]iscussions about and advocacy of collaboration and collegiality have largely taken place within a particular perspective on human relationships: the cultural perspective. In the main, this cultural perspective has been grounded in traditions of sociological functionalism, social anthropology, and corporate management. It is a perspective that emphasizes what is shared and held in common in human relationships: values, habits, norms, beliefs, and "the way we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, quoted in Hargreaves (50).

Hargreaves (1991) correctly points out that the problem with this perspective is the assumption of a shared culture. That many cultures exist within a social organisation is not given adequate consideration. Furthermore it is possible that these cultures may be in dissonance with each other and may even compete with each other for social and organisational space.

Marshall makes the assumption that micropolitical research is one of the most useful ways of understanding the "cultural conflicts played out between teachers and administrators at the school site" (1991, 141). She goes on to say "where two or more cultures coexist and interact, there will be conflicts of values in the day-to-day interaction" (1991, 142). I reiterate that in a situation of crisis, conflict is likely to intensify. Understandings of the context, in particular the cultural contexts of the educational sites, are vital to understanding the micropolitical processes at play.

Perhaps the points made by Hargreaves (1991) and Marshall (1991) suggest that the micropolitics of educational change needs to include in its scope understanding of organisation theory. Understanding how organisations function and the social frameworks that influence
organisational life might provide a fuller understanding of how the micropolitics of education plays itself out in education organisations.

An area not adequately taken up in the current literature on micropolitics is the extent to which institutional and individual histories shape the micropolitical terrain. In the doctoral study referred to here (Soobrayan, V. 2003) it was found that the political and educational histories of the major players significantly influenced institutional and individual relationship and interaction in the process. The institutional history of the college was viewed negatively by individuals in institutions that commanded some form of authority over it.

The [provincial education department] disliked [the college] because [the college] had an attitude towards the [provincial education department]. They were reciprocating the attitude that was shown towards them (Lucy).

The reason [the college] did not become a subdivision is because of the attitude of the [the provincial education department] or some people at the [the provincial education department]. They have this attitude because of [the college's] history. … There is bad blood between some groups at [the college] and some people at [the provincial education department] (Selena).

The [provincial education department] would have been better disposed towards us [the college] if appointments made in '98 were more transformative … They perceived there was no change (Rector of the college).

The reactions of the provincial education authority towards the college were, in part, explained in terms of the historical antagonisms that prevailed between the two institutions. The perception of the college as a symbol of white Afrikaner privilege had roots in a history that was clouded with accusations of financial mismanagement. In addition, an individual within the provincial education department held the view that the college was spending lavishly on "nice to haves" (Shani) while other institutions struggled to make ends meet. What emerged in this study was that institutional histories, and by extension, personal histories, may influence the micropolitical decisions taken in an education change context, thereby directing the outcomes of such education change.

Finally, there appears to be inadequate acknowledgement in the micropolitics research done so far. That the researcher herself is likely to constitute a site of micropolitical action. It is feasible that respondents may use the researcher to obtain information or even to convey information to others through her. It is possible too that the researcher's presence may have an impact on the micropolitical climate prevailing in the change environment. My own position as a former staff member of the college was a situational bias that could have skewed my reading of the data and indeed my conduct during the interview process. While I determined to reduce such possibilities as far as possible, I could not guarantee this. Fortunately I did not find evidence of respondents attempting to use me to achieve specific effects in the incorporation process.

Conclusion

In seeking to develop a broader understanding of micropolitics and education I note the skepticism expressed by Haag and Smith (2002) who show that the possibilities for the success of systemic change are undermined by the micropolitics at play in the change environment. I agree with their view that the "study of micropolitics is absolutely crucial for school administrators and reform

---

Prior to the democratic elections of 1994, the National Party which was dominated by Afrikaners, held political power in South Africa. As such, Afrikaners enjoyed numerous financial, political and educational benefits as a consequence of the policy of apartheid.
advocates" (2002, 15). Yet I do not think that the micropolitics of change necessarily militates against the possibility of systemic change.

Mawhinney (1999b) argues that researchers of micropolitical phenomena must grapple with the discontinuities between organisational perspectives that stress the logic of institutional change and those that emphasise the centrality of social construction and action. Empirical evidence gleaned from micropolitical studies addresses the validity of Mawhinney’s (1999b) views – the micropolitics researcher needs to adopt a social constructivist outlook. This implies subjecting the observable phenomena within a social organisation to a cognitive process and to a theory of organisation that is flexible rather than one which prescribes its analytical frames.

I suggest that a fundamental flaw in the approach to the study of micropolitics thus far has been in the emphasis of the micro-aspect of micropolitics. This focus has resulted in the study of micropolitics being reduced to an explication of incidents of micropolitical activity. The politicality of the change environment has not been given adequate attention. By politicality I do not refer to the vicissitudes of party-political affiliations, but to the historical, social and political context in which the change is to take place. In other words, the contextualisation of the change environment needs to be foregrounded. There needs to be explicit recognition that the micropolitics theorist should have a ‘contingency’ mindset. Perhaps what the numerous illustrations of micropolitics that the available literature is pointing to is that micropolitics is contextually driven and contingently developed.

References
Perspectives in Education, Volume 22(4), December 2004


West M 1999. Micropolitics leadership and all that: The need to increase the micropolitical awareness and skills of school leaders. School Leadership and Management, 19(2), 189-196. Online: http://ehost16.global.epnet.co