

MICROPOLITICS IN THE SCHOOL: TEACHER LEADERS' USE OF POLITICAL SKILL AND INFLUENCE TACTICS*

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Abstract

This study focused upon the micropolitics of teacher leadership, namely the knowledge of tactics, influencing factors and consequences of teacher leaders' daily political interactions with others within the school setting. Blase (1990, 1997) and Blase and Anderson (1995) acknowledge that teachers are not passive actors in the politics of schools, but also use political strategies to increase their bargaining power through the deployment of influence tactics. The purpose of the research was to provide a profile of power by examining teacher leaders' use of political skill and influence in the organizational context of the school environment.

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2 Sumario en español

Este estudio enfocó sobre el micropolitics de liderazgo de maestro, a saber el conocimiento de tácticas, influyendo los factores y las consecuencias de interacciones políticas diarias de líderes de maestro con otros dentro de la colocación de la escuela. Hastiado (1990, 1997) y Hastiada y Anderson (1995) reconoce que maestros no son actores pasivos en la política de escuelas, pero también utilizan estrategias políticas para aumentar su poder de negociación por el despliegue de tácticas de influencia. El propósito de la investigación fue de proporcionar un perfil del poder revisando el uso de líderes de maestro de habilidad e influencia políticas en el contexto organizativo del ambiente de la escuela.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

3 INTRODUCTION

The school building is a place where constant tactical power struggles occur in an effort to obtain control over real or symbolic resources. Schools as organizations are best recognized as political systems both internally and in their external relationships (Bacharach, 1983). Participants can be conceived as “political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies to achieve these objectives” (Bacharach, p. 10). Each group within the organization has a different view of who has the formal power (authority), who has the informal power (influence), or who should have the power to make organizational decisions. Owen (2006) observes, “Power, conflict, coalitions and policy are alive and well in schools and make up the fabric of educational politics. Much of the time, education is not about what is best for children; it is about the adult issues of power and control” (p. 103). Iannaccone (1991) found that schools display their own lives, social climate, organizational culture, and subsystems in pursuit of their own interests. “Schools are so different that professionals visiting two of them in the same neighborhood of the same system can quickly sense and even describe the differences” (1991, p. 466).

3.1 Micropolitics in Schools

In schools, intraorganizational politics are a daily occurrence. There are political forces within schools that dictate how things have been done, how things are done, and how things will be done. The micropolitics of education—human behavior, power and how people use it to influence others and to protect themselves, and how people compete with each other to get what they want—shape the tone of the organization (Acker-Hocevar & Touchton, 1999; Blase & Anderson, 1995). Micropolitics encompass the daily interactions, negotiations and bargains of any school (Lindle, 1999). Mawhinney (1999) posits, “Micropolitical research has emerged as one of the new thrusts in understanding the complexities of organizational life in schools” (p. 161).

A gap exists between the organizational world which is presented in theory and research and the organizational world we all experience. The study of micropolitics provides educators and researchers with opportunities to explore a theory of leadership based upon the realities of everyday school life and day-to-day decision-making. Lindle (1999) adds:

3.1.1

The study of micropolitics is absolutely a question of survival for school leaders and other educators. Indeed, most practicing school leaders are already astute, or even unwitting, students of micropolitics. Not only is the study of micropolitics inevitable, for most school leaders it is an inherent occupational requirement. (p. 176)

3.2 Teacher Leadership

Educators readily can identify colleagues who they describe as leaders: “individuals to whom they look for professional advice and guidance, and whose views matter to others in the school” (Danielson, 2006, p. 12). However, in the field of education, a struggle continues with the basic definition of teacher leadership that should be fundamental in educators’ professional vocabulary. Many administrators, boards of education, parents and even teachers don’t recognize or understand teacher leadership. This lack of understanding adds to the obstacles teacher leaders face (Ackerman & Mackenzie, 2006; Donaldson, 2007). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) contend, “We are a long way from a common understanding of teacher leadership. Confusion about definitions and expectations of teacher leaders abound” (pp. 4-5). York-Barr and Duke’s (2004) meta-analysis on 20 years of research on teacher leadership states, “The lack of definition may be due, in part, to the expansive territory encompassed under the umbrella term ‘teacher leadership’” (p. 260).

The evolution of teacher leadership has been slow because the system has not been organized to treat teachers as leaders. Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, and Hann (2002) found a “striking lack of recognition of teachers as either potential or actual leaders in schools” (p. 23). Teachers are reluctant to accept the title of teacher leader because their colleagues may interpret it as an administrative role. Furthermore, some teachers avoid formal leadership positions on the grounds that these positions will interfere with their teaching and take them away from their students (Boles & Troen, 1996; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1998). Through their discussions with teachers, Crowther et al. found that “I just want to teach, I don’t want to be a leader” (p. 35) was heard frequently.

3.3 Political Skill

Researchers have stated that an important way to be effective in organizational settings is to develop and use one’s social and political competence, and to build on the ability to persuade, influence, and control others (Kolodinsky, 2002; Mintzberg, 1983, Pfeffer, 1981). While performance, effectiveness, and career success are determined in part by hard work and intelligence, other factors such as social astuteness, networking, positioning, and savvy also have important roles in organizations (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005; Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky et al., 2005; Haag, 1995; Kolodinsky, 2002; Marshall & Scribner, 1991).

Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983) suggest that to be effective in political environments, individuals need to possess *political skill*. Political skill refers to the exercise of influence through persuasion, manipulation, and negotiation (Mintzberg, 1983). Ahern et al. (2004) define political skill as “the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and /or organizational objectives” (p. 311).

The four dimensions of political skill are: (1) social astuteness, (2) interpersonal influence, (3) networking ability and (4) apparent sincerity (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005). Social astuteness is the ability to read and understand people. Socially astute individuals are often seen as resourceful in dealing with others and can accurately perceive and understand social situations as well as the personal interactions that occur in these settings (Perrewé & Nelson, 2004). Individuals high in interpersonal influence appear to colleagues as being pleasant and productive to associate with, using such behaviors to control their environments. They have a “subtle and convincing style that exerts a powerful influence on those around them” (Ferris, Davidson et al., 2005, p. 10). Networking ability is the ability to build connections, friendships alliances and coalitions. Those highly proficient in networking ability are able to position themselves well in order to create and take advantage of opportunities. Their subtle style allows politically skilled individuals to easily develop strong and beneficial alliances and coalitions (Perrewé & Nelson, 2004). Apparent sincerity is carrying out influence attempts in apparently sincere and genuine ways. This facet of political skill determines the success or failure of influence attempts because it focuses on perceived intentions of the person attempting to influence others.

3.4 Influence

Literature on the subject of influence indicates that people use different tactics depending upon the target of their request, and that tactic use is based upon the object or goal of their request (Kipnis, Schmidt, &

Wilkinson, 1980). Six influence tactics are the subject of Schriesheim and Hinkin's (1990) study on influence strategies used by subordinates and reflect the influence subscales used in this study: ingratiation, exchange, rationality, assertiveness, upward appeal and coalitions. Individuals utilizing ingratiation make attempts to get the subject of the influence attempt to think favorably of them or get them in a good mood before requesting something (Blickle, 2000). Stengle (2000) characterizes ingratiation as "...strategic praise, praise with a purpose" (p. 14). The exchange strategy entails the use of implied or overt promises that the subject of the influence attempt will receive rewards or benefits if a request is granted, or reminds them of a past favor that will be given in return (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). Individuals utilizing rationality use logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade the subject they are attempting to influence. Assertiveness is influencing others, "by using demands and direct requests in a forceful manner to persuade the subject of the influence attempt to comply with the requests" (Blickle, 2000, p. 143). Upward appeal describes attempts to persuade the subject to comply by relying on the chain of command or appealing to higher management for assistance (Kipnis, et al., 1980). The use of the coalitions strategy is to seek the aid of others to persuade or use others' support to aid in the influence attempt (Yukl & Falbe, 1990).

4 The Research Problem

A facet of school organizational contexts that has received little attention in micropolitical studies is the political aspect of teacher leadership, especially the knowledge of strategies, influencing factors and consequences of teacher leaders' political interactions with principals and colleagues. In addition, even with the development of micropolitical theories in education (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Hoyle, 1986; Iannaccone, 1975) that have brought about significant studies on organizational life, the micropolitical perspective in education is seldom used to study individual and group interactions and behaviors in school settings (Blase, 1991; Du, 2005; Smylie & Brownlee-Conyers, 1992). Only a few studies of cooperative and/or consensual political relationships between teachers and school principals have appeared in the micropolitical literature (Blase, 1990, 1997; Blase & Anderson, 1995; Du).

5 Purpose of the Study

A major tenet of teacher leadership is the ability to influence and engage colleagues toward improved practice (Wasley, 1991). Strong relationships are teacher leaders' most powerful asset because they are the most powerful influence, next to students, on other teachers' practice (Donaldson, 2007). Wasley refers to teacher leadership as "the ability to encourage colleagues to change, to do things they wouldn't ordinarily consider without the influence of the leader" (p. 23). Teacher culture based on relationships is particularly influential in schools, often overshadowing administrative and legislative influence (Spillane, 2006).

The purpose of the study was to provide a profile of power through teacher leaders' use of political skill and influence within the school setting. This was accomplished by examining the micropolitical perspectives of teacher leaders to the degree they utilized political skill and influence tactics in their interactions with other faculty to achieve their outcomes. It was proposed that political skill is inherent in teacher leaders and that they are effective in the implementation of political behaviors, especially when interacting with principals and with colleagues.

By providing a profile of power and influence as it is exercised by teacher leaders, this study builds upon the relevant literature in the areas of organizational politics, micropolitics, political skill and influence tactics as well as research on teacher leadership. The results of this study will be valuable to future teacher leaders, school administrators, teacher preparation programs and teacher leadership training programs.

6 Research Questions

Through preliminary research on how teacher leaders function effectively in the micropolitical environment of the school, the following research questions emerged:

1. How do politics within a school environment affect teacher leadership?

2. How do teacher leaders perceive their role in the exercise of power and influence in school-based politics?
3. To what extent do teacher leaders deliberately utilize political skill and influence tactics when interacting with principals and colleagues?

These research questions were examined by using a mixed methods approach that utilized both quantitative and qualitative strategies. By responding to the *Teacher Leader Questionnaire*, teacher leaders identified the degree they made use of political skill and influence strategies during their interaction with principals and with colleagues. Through open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, teacher leaders' perceptions on how micropolitics within a school environment affected teacher leadership, and how they viewed their role in the exercise of power and influence in school-based politics were explored. The quantitative data identified the areas of focus, namely four dimensions of political skill and six influence strategies, while the qualitative data substantiated those areas of focus.

7 Research Procedures

Data were collected from past and present K-12 teacher leaders involved in a program designed to develop leadership skills. The program provided teacher leadership development for K-12 and community college educators from 19 public school districts, two intermediate school districts/regional educational service agencies, and two community colleges. Members of the program also had the opportunity to enroll in courses in teacher leadership to attain Education Specialist certification at a participating university. For this study, I focused on the 400 teacher leaders from K-12 institutions involved in the program since its inception in 1997. A total of 149 teacher leaders completed the Teacher Leader Questionnaire for response rate of 37%.

Purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), sometimes referred to as *purposive* or *judgment* sampling, guided the selection of the participants in this study. In this type of sampling, the decision is made on the purpose the researcher wants informants to serve and then the researcher goes out to find those candidates most likely to provide the required information. Individuals were selected based on specific questions/purposes of research in lieu of random sampling and on the basis of information available about these individuals (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). For this study, I looked to where I could reach acknowledged practicing teacher leaders. Therefore, participants in the teacher leader program were chosen based on the criterion that they could provide the broadest range of information possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I developed the Teacher Leader Questionnaire by incorporating the 18-item *Political Skill Inventory (PSI)* (Ferris, Davidson, & Perrewé, 2005; Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky et al., 2005) that identified four key dimensions of political skill: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Schreisheim and Hinkin's (1990) *Influence Subscales* instrument was used to measure six influence tactics: ingratiation, rationality, assertiveness, exchange, upward appeal, and coalitions. Substantiation for the validity of these subscales has been reported in previous studies (Farmer & Maslyn, 1999; Kolodinsky, 2002). The subscales consisted of 34 items in which teacher leaders indicated the frequency they utilized influence tactics with principals and with colleagues.

The Teacher Leader Questionnaire concluded with a series of eight open-ended questions which allowed teachers to reflect and respond. The reflective responses focused on teacher leaders' perceptions of school culture, political relationships among teachers, political relationships with principals, influence tactics, and insight on political behavior in the workplace.

Participants in the study were given the option to volunteer to be interviewed by providing contact information at the end of the questionnaire. Through purposeful random sampling (Patton, 2002) nine teacher leaders were chosen for standardized open-ended interviews.

8 Data Analysis

The data for this study were analyzed with both quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (open-ended-responses, interviews) methods. Through a process called *complementarity*, qualitative and quantitative methods were used to measure overlapping but distinct facets of the phenomenon under investigation. Results from one method type enhanced, illustrated, and clarified results from the other (Caracelli & Greene, 1993).

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSSTM). Descriptive statistics, variable means, and standard deviations were computed for teacher leaders' utilization of the four dimensions of political skill and six influence subscales. Additional tests were conducted including correlations of political skill dimensions when influencing principals and colleagues. A paired samples t-test was computed to determine whether a difference existed when influence tactics were used with principals or with colleagues. Multiple linear regression analyses were performed to determine whether the four dimensions of political skill (predictor) were significantly related to the six influence subscales (outcome). Interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses were coded and combined with the questionnaire data in what is termed, *intermethod mixing* (Johnson & Turner, 2003). Intermethod mixing allowed me to gain insight into content that would not have been available in a stand-alone closed ended questionnaire.

9 Findings and Conclusions

9.1 Micropolitics and Teacher Leadership

Teacher leaders related their perceptions of school-based politics and the effects on their efficacy as leaders. A review of these perspectives provided rich data on teacher leaders' views of the micropolitics within the political arena of the school. Analysis of the data indicates that a dichotomy exists within schools whereas the very sources of support for teacher leadership, colleagues and principals, also create barriers to their success.

Support from colleagues took the forms of collaborative group interaction, encouraging teacher leadership, and embracing those teachers who choose to lead by creating a collegial school culture. Support from principals included practicing effective servant leadership, providing funding for professional development, and encouraging teachers to take on leadership roles without repercussions for risk taking. An additional area of support instrumental to their success was their participation in a formal teacher leader program. Respondents pointed to their colleagues in the program as means of support in terms of resources and as contacts for input. One teacher related that involvement in the teacher leader program provided her with the courage to be a leader within the school.

In contrast to the factors that were viewed as supports to teacher leadership, teacher leaders identified factors they perceived as barriers that discouraged teacher leadership. Although instrumental in supporting teacher leaders, colleagues and principals were also identified as prime contributors to the factors that negatively impacted teacher leadership. Teacher leaders related how they encountered resistance from other teachers in their daily interactions. Resistance took the form of non-support from colleagues who blocked progress of those who took on leadership roles or who attempted to present new ideas. Taking on leadership roles sometimes resulted in being ostracized by colleagues. The egalitarian nature of teaching was identified as an impediment to teacher leaders' abilities to step forward to lead because of the idea that teachers were all equal and those who tried to lead challenged teacher solidarity. Similarly, teacher leaders attempting to lead were interpreted as trying to get ahead for personal gain and position.

Resentment from colleagues was another difficulty teacher leaders faced. Resentment occurred when other teachers perceived the use of undue influence over the principal. Participants in the study described the tense relationships and opposition they felt from colleagues as a result of having a close working relationship with the principal. If the perception that teacher leaders were either anointed or appointed by the principal, they immediately lost credibility as leaders (Wasley, 1991).

Political maneuvering and playing politics were also identified as factors that negatively affected teacher leadership. According to participants in the study, these political behaviors are inherent in organizations. Ulterior motives include the advancement of hidden agendas, and keeping others down while trying to advance personal agendas. Respondents expressed frustration with hidden politics because the politics were sometimes hard to identify and to address. It was acknowledged that the person working the hardest may not be recognized, but the individual playing the political game the best "wins." Finally, the presence of alliances, factions and cliques of teachers were identified by teacher leaders as groups that discourage teacher leadership by attempting to negate or sabotage the advancement of teacher leadership.

Principals acting in political ways were also identified by teacher leaders as negatively impacting teacher leadership. Respondents observed that a principals' inability to give up power had a direct effect on whether teacher leadership emerged and was sustained within schools. The traditional hierarchical structure of the school where initiatives are solely dictated by the principal adversely affected teacher leadership. Finally, the lack of recognition and encouragement of teacher leaders by principals were seen as negatively affecting leadership.

9.2 Power and Influence in School-Based Politics

The results of this study address the micropolitical issues of power and influence within the school, and teacher leaders' roles in school-based politics. Teacher leaders described the positive and negative forms that power and influence in the school take. They identified positive influencing behaviors such as providing advice, developing confidence and trust, understanding and interpreting the school's culture, developing relationships, and counteracting negative influences. Negative influencing behaviors included informal leaders who influence negatively, teachers that are part of alliances who influence each other with negativity, bullies, and those who use influence to advance personal agendas.

9.3 Teacher Leaders' Utilization of Political Skill and Influence Tactics

Political Skill. Teacher leaders' responses to the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) items and reflective responses on the Teacher Leadership Questionnaire and in open-ended interviews, reveal that they are politically astute as they regularly utilize the four dimensions of political skill when interacting with others within the school environment. The combined data indicate that teacher leaders utilized the four political skill dimensions with regularity in the workplace: apparent sincerity, interpersonal influence, and social astuteness. Teacher leaders perceived that they had above average political skill.

Teacher leaders were asked to respond to a 6-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The combined mean among all 149 teacher leaders that responded to the PSI reported a mean rating of at least 4.73 indicating that even the least used political skill dimension, "networking ability" was also well above average.

Another important finding in this study is that teacher leaders utilized multiple dimensions of political skill to achieve their desired outcomes. Through the coding process, I discovered that a number of reflective responses from the Teacher Leader Questionnaire included combinations of political skill dimensions in which teacher leaders utilized more than one at a given time. Specifically, teachers described skills that were identified as combinations of the "interpersonal influence" and "apparent sincerity" dimensions. The reflective responses also provided data that the political skill dimensions "interpersonal influence" and "networking ability" were used in combination by teacher leaders. These findings indicate that teacher leaders adept at political skill do not compartmentalize individual dimensions. They combine political skill dimensions to navigate the micropolitical landscape of the school.

Influence. Micropolitical theory suggests influence can be very pervasive in organizations, and the use of influence tactics determines the success of people in their attempts to influence others.

The data analysis for this portion of the study was two-fold. Both the frequency of the influence attempt and comparisons of the means of upward and lateral influence attempts were identified. This study also employed a paired samples t-test to determine whether a difference existed when the means of teacher leaders' use of upward influence strategies (with administrators) were compared with the means of lateral influence attempts (with colleagues).

The influence subscales data identified that teacher leaders used "rationality" and "ingratiation" more frequently than the other tactics when attempting upward and lateral influence. Although the tactics "exchange," "assertiveness," and "upward appeal" had higher mean scores for influence attempts with colleagues than with principals, respondents reported on the influence subscales instrument that they rarely or never attempted these influence strategies with either group.

T-test scores for upward and lateral influence attempts were identical for "rationality" ($m = 4.31$, $t = .000$), indicating non-significance when the influence strategy was used with both colleagues and principals.

Research on influence by Charbonneau (2004) and Yukl and Falbe (1990) reveals that “rationality” is a widely used and effective influence strategy regardless of the direction of the influence attempt. The t-test data revealed significance in the ways teacher leaders delivered both upward and lateral “ingratiation,” “exchange,” “assertiveness” and “upward appeal” tactics.

Respondents to open-ended items and interviewees spoke about the skills they used to achieve desired outcomes with either lateral or upward influence attempts. They relied on “ingratiation,” “rationality,” and “assertiveness,” strategies during upward and lateral interactions. The “rationality” tactic was the most frequently mentioned. A noteworthy finding was that the teacher leaders did not identify “upward appeal,” “coalitions,” or “exchange” as influencing tactics they utilized.

Interviewees identified the approaches they used with both principals and colleagues. The approaches were then coded and categorized into the six influence tactics studied. Respondents to the reflective responses identified the use of five of the six influence tactics with “upward appeal” as the influence tactic they rarely used. Finally, the interview and open-response data in this study identified “ingratiation” and “rationality” as the influence strategies most frequently utilized.

The data show that politically skilled teacher leaders tended to avoid influence attempts that involved confrontation (assertiveness), circumventing the chain of command (upward appeal), seeking the aid of others to persuade (coalitions), or quid pro quo arrangements (exchange) when attempting upward and lateral influence. Yukl and Tracey (1990) support these findings on the uses of “assertiveness” and “coalitions” stating, “These tactics are likely to be viewed as socially undesirable forms of influence behavior. . .the target may become resentful or angry with the agent for trying to coerce or manipulate him or her” (p. 533).

10 CONCLUSION

This study examined teacher leaders’ utilization of political skill dimensions and influence tactics during their daily interactions with colleagues and principals. Micropolitical studies of political skill and influence in the context of educational organizations are uncommon, so this facet of research provides the potential for additional studies in the fields of educational and organizational research.

The findings from this study suggest that school-based politics affect teacher leadership in both positive and negative ways. Through analysis, it was determined that acceptance of teacher leadership needs to take place through concerted efforts by faculties as a whole. In political organizations such as schools, traditional hierarchical perspectives of leadership must give way to the concept of shared leadership between principals and teacher leaders.

Teacher leaders acknowledged that their involvement in the formal teacher leadership program cohorts allowed them to develop both the skills and the support networks necessary to successfully function as leaders within their individual buildings and at the district level. Relevant findings in teacher leadership and micropolitical studies in the area of school-based politics support these results (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Zinn, 1997).

Teacher leadership programs and school districts may benefit from the findings of this study. By administering the PSI and influence subscales to teachers and analyzing the data, teacher leader programs and school districts will have the capability to identify individuals who possess the capacity to assess complex social situations within the micropolitical context of the school and know what to do to exert positive influence in those situations. Those teachers who show a propensity to lead may enhance their strengths and develop their areas of weaknesses in the political skill dimensions through professional development such as drama-based training, coaching, and mentoring programs (Ferris et al., 2005).

Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson (1980) assert that everyone influences everyone else in organizations, regardless of their job title or position in the organization. Politically skilled teacher leaders acknowledged they utilized influence tactics in upward and lateral ways to achieve their outcomes. It is worth noting that individuals do not necessarily use the same influence strategy in every situation. Similarly, different individuals may choose different influence strategies when faced with similar situations. Higgins, Judge, and Ferris (1993) state that politically skilled individuals tend to avoid certain tactics in favor of others, thereby demonstrating that political skill use depends on the situation coupled with the flexibility to carry

out influencing behaviors that are inherent in its components. A respondent to the reflective response portion of the Teacher Leader Questionnaire succinctly summed up these assertions, “I look at politics in the school setting as having a ‘tool box’ of strategies used to influence peers and supervisors. You need to know which tool to use at a given time.”

It was proposed at the onset of this study that teacher leaders are effective in the implementation of political skill when interacting with principals and with colleagues. The data acquired from this study support this assumption regarding teacher leaders’ use of political skill dimensions and influence tactics. These data indicate that teacher leaders are motivated to use political skill and influence tactics and have the capability to utilize these political behaviors to attain their outcomes. Despite the political factors present to discourage them, teacher leaders continue to emerge in leadership roles. They possess both the *political will* and the *political skill* (Mintzberg, 1985) to be politically effective in the micropolitical environment of the school.

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