



The Gender Politics of Educational Change. Amanda Datnow. Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1998. 161 pages.

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Why is school reform so difficult? Why are reform initiatives successful in some schools but failures in others? In *The Gender Politics of Educational Change*, Amanda Datnow provides a vivid example of how micropolitics, in this case gender micropolitics, thwarted a secondary school reform effort. Basing her description on a qualitative study of the implementation of an ambitious school detracking effort, Datnow illustrates how money, commitment, and administrative and district support were overwhelmed by the efforts of a small but powerful group of dissenters. The reform climate appeared to be ideal. Central High School received over one million dollars in state funds to detrack the school, moving the structure of the school toward a house structure, with “homerooms, interdisciplinary thematic instruction, alternative assessment, a customized calendar, a peer-coaching professional development model, and a new governance structure” (p. 1). In addition, the proposal, written by a group of teachers, had the support of the district office, the school board, and the teachers’ union.

Given that the school had money, commitment from many teachers, and support from outside of the school, what went wrong? Datnow graphically describes the efforts of a small group of veteran male teachers to stop the reform effort. These self-described “Good Old Boys” combined sexist discourse and political connections with powerful men in the community to belittle the largely female group of enthusiasts and to derail the reform. By the end of the five-year period, the Good Old Boys were successful. Nothing had changed at Central High School.

Datnow examines three interrelated themes—gender, micropolitics, and school reform. Where gender was a critical factor in this case, race, ethnicity, native language, age, or other defining characteristics could be substituted. Anyone familiar with school reform knows that micropolitics is a near certainty. It is played out through the use of discourse and political connections to determine who will represent the school. Too often, a group representing the status quo wins this battle.

This book provides a useful framework for anyone engaged in school reform, and it serves as an excellent text for courses on school change, gender relations, or schools and society. Previous explanations of reform failure have rarely considered



micropolitics as a factor. This book looks within the school rather than to external forces to explain the frustration of failed school reform. It provides students and educators engaged in reform an opportunity to consider the influence of cliques and subgroups on the culture of the school, and it provides a useful frame of reference to consider how groups within a school vie to control the vision of the school.

Datnow provides a vivid description of the process that the Good Old Boys used to derail reform at Central and augments this description with brief descriptions of similar failures in other secondary schools. Many of us who work in the mostly female arena of elementary schools may not have seen gender politics at work to derail school reform, but we have seen small cliques (based on race, ethnicity, age, community, interests) stall or stop reforms. Gender, with its historic imbalance in power relations, adds a formidable element to school reform efforts.

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