

# Gendered Behavior Patterns in School Board Governance

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**Background/Context:** Educational leadership literature lacks research focused on how gender influences decision making, in particular at the highest level of school governance, the school board table. Consequently, whether gender makes a difference during decision making at the school board table has yet to be determined.

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** This article examines the influence of gender during decision making at the school board table as related to board members' perceived vocal space/influence and perceptions from others (board colleagues and superintendents) about board members' vocal space/influence. Findings from one of the few studies of women school board members and some of the published literature on women superintendents are used to support discussions and to increase insight into how gender dynamics may play out at the school board table.

**Research Design:** This qualitative study is a secondary analysis of a larger study (Mountford, 2001) that investigated many factors related to board member decision-making styles, such as motivation for board service and conceptions of power.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** The article concludes with a discussion of how decisions are impacted by gender dynamics prior to and during decision making and further suggests ideas for school board training and educational leadership programs of ways in which programs can be improved to address gender issues impacting decision making at the board table.

Although women comprise approximately half of the world's population, as of 2006, women held no more than 12% and, in some countries 0%,

of legislative seats on decision-making councils across the world. While the number of women serving on regional or local decision-making councils in the U.S. is higher at around 24% (Dorning, 1996, p. 2a), research has also shown that, as recently as 2007, only 18% of our nation's superintendents were women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In addition, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) reported that 38.9% of the school board seats in the U.S. were held by women (Hess, 2002). These figures are shockingly low when considering the abundance of women—roughly 75% (Skrla, 2002)—who currently serve and historically have served as paraprofessionals and teachers in America's public school systems. While society has constructed institutional norms that embrace women as teachers, the general public still does not expect to see women in educational leadership positions.

To some degree, the underrepresentation of women in U.S. leadership roles is the logical outgrowth of historical events. Throughout the last century, men not only constructed the meanings and tasks associated with leadership roles, but also scripted most of the earliest management theories (Enomoto, 2000). Since the inception of management and leadership roles, the behaviors related to these roles represent norms and identity patterns associated with male behaviors and, thus, are difficult to change (Skrla, 2000). For change to occur, deeper understandings of the implications of these inequities for educational decisions and policy making are important. Yet, few empirical studies have examined the impact of male-dominated boards or councils at the school board level. In fact, Hess and Leal (2005) recently pointed out that,

While some scholars have examined the practices and politics of local school boards (see for example, Danzberger, 1994; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; Hess, 1999; Peterson, 1976) and found that school board member behaviors are structured by organizational routines, and, due to the amateur nature of boards, nonpartisan elections, and a tendency to micromanage district affairs; little if any research had been conducted on school boards in general; particularly the gender dynamics of school boards and the potential implications for decisions and policy making. (p. 486)

Hess and Leal further suggested, "Surveys and field research that seeks to collect data on this topic, [gender dynamics of boards] whether at the district, school, or individual level, would be most welcomed" (2005, p. 486).

Educational leadership literature includes little research focused on

how gender influences decision making, in particular at the highest level of school governance, the school board table. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present findings from a study which examined the impact (relative to perceived voice and influence) of gender during school board decision-making processes. To meet this aim, the article articulates behaviors of women board members during decision-making processes and, for comparative analysis purposes, also includes the behaviors of men board members. The study is significant in that few attempts have been made to understand the effects of disproportionate gender representation at the school board table (Hess & Leal, 2005).

Further, the consequences of disproportionate representation on school boards is readily evidenced by state and federal educational amendments such as Title I (1965), Title IX (1972), and acts such as No Child Left Behind (2002). These amendments were a direct response to the inability of local school governance bodies to consistently consider the rights of *all* students. Consequences on a larger scale include increases in the number of mayoral takeovers of large urban school districts (Cuban, 2004) and heightened efforts by politicians and scholars (see, for example, Finn, Keegan) to abolish school board governance altogether. In addition, increased accountability measures for raising student achievement from state and federal government in an increasingly pluralistic society should put those who covet local school control on red alert—an alert signaling the immediate need to reconceptualize, heighten, and, in some cases, mandate board development and training that will enable school board members to learn their roles and responsibilities, collaborative decision making behaviors, and reassess their motives for board membership. Increased attention to board governance structures and refined training strategies could result in a new era of school leadership in which those serving in leadership capacities at the local level prioritize student achievement during decision making.

Popular opinion holds that school board members are volunteers charged with conducting complex business matters with limited time, resources, and specific knowledge of the educational field; thus, board members are, to some degree, excused for their poor leadership and decision-making behaviors (Jaworski, 1995; McCurdy, 1992). However, condoning these behaviors has, to a certain degree, resulted in unequal levels of influence at the school board table and in the development and implementation of policies and practices that marginalize certain groups of students (Skrla & Schuerich, 2004).

In this article, we focus on gender-specific vocal behaviors as a beginning point in understanding how best to help school board members with decision making, especially board members serving on school

boards dominated by men (the majority of boards across the country), and how women board members can deal with normative gender expectations while remaining influential. For example, later in the article, readers will find some of the study's narratives suggest that being vocal is an accepted behavior for women on boards, *only if* they avoid micromanagement and behave collaboratively during decision making. Such practices appear to provide a way for women to advance agendas and be influential. At the same time, high vocal men who micromanage others tended to have the greatest influence at the board table. These normative expectations are gender-specific and have a marked impact on whether women play a significant part in school board decision making. As a result of this study, we believe several compelling implications take shape related to gender, power, approaches to decision making, and vocal space/influence at the board table.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH: WOMEN ON BOARDS

Though few in number, most of the studies we reviewed for the study focused on (a) women on councils or boards, (b) women holding various leadership positions, and (c) gender dynamics in decision-making processes. The research reviewed for the study provided important findings about the differing behavioral patterns of men and women during decision-making processes. Several of these studies urged researchers to extend this line of research. To begin such an extension, the following section of the article reviews relevant literature and includes two subsections: (a) The Absence and Presence of Women on Boards and (b) Behaviors of Women Board Members.

#### THE ABSENCE AND PRESENCE OF WOMEN ON BOARDS

Historically, women have faced difficulty when wishing to become members of local, state, or national political structures. Shedding some light on the context, Paul Peterson (1981) described the arena as follows:

Local politics has always been dominated by power structures consisting of bankers and businessmen who together with a few conservative labor leaders and politicians beholden to them, dictate the major contours of local policy. (p. 87)

Focusing on the experiences of women in these contexts, Twombly (1995) explained that:

because of the images it [leadership literature] portrays, the images set expectations and create the possibilities about who can be leaders. Thus, these images become norms or standards of which, when matched with prevalent societal stereotypes about gender, serve either as barriers or as tickets to advancement. (p. 68)

The norms and stereotypes found in traditional leadership literature have disadvantaged women aspiring to any type of board membership.

While unclear *when* women first began to appear on school boards, by the early 1900s, passage of the suffrage amendment had a strong impact on women's ability to win seats on city school boards. Indeed, school boards that did not have at least one woman were considered out of fashion (Blount, 1998). The rapid increase in the numbers of women on school boards was documented by George Counts (1927; cited in Blount, p. 80) and led him to predict that women rather than men would soon write school policy. Counts cautioned that most boards had only *one* woman—typically, a White, Protestant, middle-class housewife—a fact that reflected tokenism (Blount, 1998). In spite of increasing numbers and the optimism of the times, the numbers of women on school boards peaked around 1927—about the same time Counts's book was published—however, the decline afterward was significant. As Blount (1998) stated, "At least another fifty years would pass before women again held more than 10 percent of school board seats" (p. 80).

In fact, according to a study sponsored and published by the NSBA in 1974, only 11.9% of board members were women. By 1988, another study found that 39% of school board members were women (Cameron, Underwood, & Fortune, 1988). Other data, published three years later in a supplement of the *American School Board Journal*, stated that "34.7% of school board members were women" (Bell & Chase, 1991, p. 142). More recently, in the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) "The Study of the American School Superintendency, 2000" (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), data about school board gender composition indicated that 80% of school districts had three or fewer women serving on seven- to nine-member school boards. Around the same time, a second national NSBA study of school board members (Hess, 2002) found the following:

Respondents report that more than 60% of board members in the sample districts are men. The gap is much bigger in small districts: Large-district boards are about 55% men, and small-district boards are more than 63% men. About 39.8% of school

board members were women. (p. 26)

While studies document that the number of women serving on boards has increased over time, school boards still remain dominated by men.

## BEHAVIOR PATTERNS OF WOMEN ON BOARDS

This article's purpose is to examine the impact (relative to perceived voice and influence) of gender during school board decision making. The subsections that follow present research on specific behavior patterns of men and women during decision-making processes. Due to the dearth of literature on school board members, we draw on political science literature for findings on men and women serving on local, city, or state councils. Specifically, we highlight women's (a) motives for board service, (b) cares and concerns while serving on the board, (c) conceptions and uses of power, and (d) behaviors during communication. Within these sections, we primarily focus on the behaviors of women running for or serving in a political office and/or on school boards but, again, use men in similar positions to gain a better understanding of how behavior differences and gender ratio imbalances on school boards may impact decision-making processes of school boards.

*Women's motivation for public service.* Research on the differences between men and women's motives to move into political offices is scarce. However, some researchers have found that women candidates for any type of political office need more encouragement to run than men (Fox & Lawless, 2004; Witt, Paget, & Matthews, 1995). Further, women candidates were more likely to say their motivation for running for office was grounded in a specific set of policy concerns, especially those pertaining to women and children (Fox, 1997; Swers, 2002; Thomas, 1998; Witt et al., 1995). Others have suggested women seek seats on councils or boards more often than men and tend to be more concerned with educational issues (Schlozman, Burns, Verba, & Donahue, 1995)—a finding similar to those in research focused on motives for school board membership.

Research into motivations for school board membership has consistently suggested some men and women are motivated for school board service for personal reasons, others for altruistic reasons, and still others for a combination of personal and altruistic reasons (Alby, 1979; Cistone, 1974; Garmire, 1962; Goldhammer, 1955; Gross, 1959; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Mountford, 2001; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; National School Board Association, 1996; New York Regents Advisory Committee, 1965). While all of these studies had similar findings and conclusions,

only a few (Deckman, 2007; Mountford, 2001) sought to uncover any gender differences in aspirants' reported motives for school board membership. Mountford (2001) found no significant differences in the reasons men and women were motivated to become school board members, yet did point out women reported specific reasons for service, whether personal or altruistic. On the other hand, men ran for a mixture of altruistic and personal motives and rarely reported that any specific concerns drove their board candidacy. Findings from these studies aligned with those from research (Fox, 1997; Swers, 2002; Thomas, 1998; Witt et al., 1995) related to reasons men and women seek political office. That is, women were more likely to say their motivation for seeking political office was grounded in specific policy concerns, especially those pertaining to women and children, while men's motives tended to be more general or mixed.

In a recent study, Deckman (2007) found men were more likely than women to indicate "influencing policy was an important motivating factor in their decision to become school board candidates" (p. 560). This finding, according to Deckman, runs counter to earlier gender-focused studies related to motivations for board service (see, for example, Schlesinger, 1966). Deckman also indicated men board members were more likely than women to say they ran for school boards to "apply their religious or moral views to policy" (p. 560). While Deckman's findings are interesting and unique in the area of school board members' motivation for membership research, the similarities and differences men and women board members exhibit after becoming official members of the board warrant a deeper examination of the relationship, if any, between a board member's motive for board service and his or her subsequent behavior patterns while serving on the board.

*The cares and concerns of women in public service.* Political studies have shown female politicians are more sympathetic to social and family issues than male politicians (Diamond, 1977; Hess & Leal, 2005; Kathlene, 1995; Kirkpatrick, 1974; Thomas & Welch, 1991; Werner, 1968). In addition, Hess and Leal (2005) remarked, "[earlier findings about women politicians] build on a long line of literature (e.g., Cook & Wilcox, 1991; Klein, 1984, 1985; Mueller, 1988) showing that female politicians are more likely than their male colleagues to support programs that assisted the disadvantaged and needy" (p. 479). Further, in their own study, Hess and Leal (2005) found female politicians tended to advocate for increased community participation and input.

Studies of elected school board members' primary interests revealed women "claimed more community affiliations" and were "more involved in parent-teacher organizations" (Deckman, 2007, p. 545), suggesting

“women were more likely than men to view their time on school boards as akin to community service” (p. 545). Similarly, Hess and Leal (2001, 2005) summarized research that indicates women, in contrast to men, have always been more interested in board discussions about topics such as the increase of bilingual programming or sex education. However, Donahue (1997) found very few differences between men and women as to the areas about which they seemed most concerned while they chaired a school board. Donahue found “the only difference between men and women school board chairs was that women spent a greater amount of time discussing special education programming, than did the male school board chairs” (p. 639). In addition to discussions focused on the topics of concern that motivate men and women toward public service, some researchers have expanded examinations of motivation to include the concept of power. For example, McClelland (1971, 1975) and Cavalier (2000) both cast power as an integral part of understanding human motivation.

In summary, the reviewed research on why women become public officials and what they generally seem to care about during service is fairly consistent across studies. That is, women tend to join boards or councils due to a specific concern or specific policy issue and their motivations are personal as often as they are altruistic. Once a member of a board or council, women tend to be most interested in issues or topics having to do with traditionally marginalized populations, such as exceptional needs students, and tend to stay focused on the community needs and interests. Finally, conceptions and uses of power and the way women communicate at the board table are also parts of this overall analysis. Therefore, in the next section, we review studies related to how women conceive of and use power and how they use their vocal space at the board table to influence decisions and/or to exert power in comparison with men. In total, these separate components of behavior create a behavioral collage that we suggest influences the dynamics of mixed-gender, group decision-making processes.

*How women in public service conceive of and wield power.* Research on power in educational settings has typically been conceptualized using a traditional definition of power. That is, power is understood as the ability to control or influence others. This common and well-established view of power has been termed “power over” in some educational literature and textbooks and is the one most people are exposed to and familiar with (Brunner, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2002b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Follett, 1942; Sergiovanni, 1991, 2000). Growing, but less predominant in educational literature, is a different description of power (Brunner, 1995; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Capper, 1993; Chase, 1995;

Follett, 1942; Noddings, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1991, 2000; Starratt, 1995). Many of these scholars have used the term “power with” to best capture the essence of this contrasting definition of power (Brunner, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Follett, 1942; Sergiovanni, 1991, 2000). A power with conception of power is evident in consensus and collaborative decision-making processes (Pounder, 1998). Literature related to this type of power in educational settings suggests that decision making be put in the hands of multiple stakeholders (Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Grogan, 2000; Mountford, 2004; Pounder, 1998). An incentive for this use of power is to “flatten hierarchies and to empower others within and outside the organization to be heavily involved in the decision-making process” (Mountford, 2004, p. 711). Simply, a power with conception is believed to allow (a) diverse idea generation, (b) hierarchical power structures to flatten, and, perhaps most importantly, (c) an opportunity for those most affected by the outcome of a decision to actually be represented and involved equally in decision-making processes.

Over the past two decades the power with definition of power and its potential impact on education decision-making processes has led to increased research on the way women in supervisory or leadership positions within educational fields define and wield power as compared to their men counterparts (see, for example, Brunner, 1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2002b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Noddings, 1992; Mountford, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1991, 2000; Starratt, 1995). Other researchers have studied the same phenomenon using a poststructuralist feminist lens (see, for example, Grogan, 2002; Skrla, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000; Young, 2004). These scholars understand that power may be conceived of as dominant or collaborative, a mobile and constantly shifting set of force relations that emerge from every social interaction and thus pervade social bodies and groups (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005). As Foucault (1978) posited, “power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1980, p. 93). Despite the assertion that power comes from everywhere, including from everyone, what is less understood is whether men and women conceive of and use power differently and, for the purposes of our study, during school board decision-making processes.

In the literature on women and power, women have been noted for sharing power and serving as agents of change (Brunner, 1997, 1998a, 2000a, 2000b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Dillard, 1995; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Helgesen, 1990; Mountford, 2001; Restine, 1993; Regan & Brooks, 1995). Other studies have sought to find a relationship between the way leaders conceive of power and if that conception of power is

predictive of the way leaders wield power. For example, Brunner (1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2002b) found that superintendents who defined power as power over (control, domination) tended to be top-down superintendents and those superintendents who defined power as power with tended to be collaborative leaders. Mountford (2004) conducted a similar study on school board members. Mountford's findings were extremely similar to Brunner's and also suggested a relationship existed between the way board members defined power and the way they wielded power. That is, board members who had defined power as power over were seen as micromanagers, and those who defined power as power with were known by others to be collaborative leaders. More importantly, for the purposes of this article, both studies found that women board members and superintendents were much more likely to define power as power with, to self-report being collaborative leaders, and to be thought of by others as collaborative leaders (Brunner 1998a, 1998b, 2000b, 2002b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Mountford, 2001; 2004).

The reason most women board members approach decisions collaboratively remains unclear (Mountford, 2001). While it may be a strategy to compensate for gendered assumptions, a way to match societal gender expectations of behavior, or simply a core part of their psyche (Bem, 1993), the results of collaborative decision-making processes are critical for schools because they build higher levels of intimacy, understanding, support, and trust (Jaworski, 1999; Pounder, 1998).

Interestingly, some scholars have been surprised by the findings on women in top leadership positions in the field of education and their tendencies to be highly collaborative when making decisions. This surprise is often centered on the theory that women are socialized very differently from men where power and leadership are concerned. For example, Moore (1981) theorized that, due to their socialization process from girlhood through womanhood, women are given very different messages related to how they "should" use power, especially when dealing with men, which would logically leave many opportunities for women new to a leadership roles to "misuse" newly gained power. Moore asserted,

In order to survive in an androcentric world, women have been taught to misuse power. This occurs early in life and is a means for women to get what they want from those who have it. Three misuses of power used by women as a way to manipulate men and as a way to stay in a safe place in relationships with the dominant male group are: 1) mothering men, 2) seducing men, and 3) acting childlike and helpless. (p. 71)

Moore's theory, then, suggests these are learned strategies women use with men because very few women have learned other more positive ways to wield power. What women learned instead as young girls is that the only thing they have that men want from them, as well as being something they can almost completely control, is sex. Moore believed that, even today, letting men have sex with them or not is the only form of power women have ever realized and controlled, setting up a myriad of opportunities for women to use these strategies and to misuse power when relating to men. Moore further contended that the number of sexual harassment cases in courts today is indicative of this problem. Other scholars have had more to say on the topic of power and gender (Acker, 1994; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Bem, 1992; Brunner, 2000a, 2000b, 2002b; Gilligan, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1987), but very few have discussed it relative to school board membership (NSBA, 1974). This lack of empirical research on women leaders, particularly those at the boardroom level and their use of power, leaves those discussing the topic (e.g., mainstream media) a comfort zone within which to rely primarily on traditional gender stereotypes and role expectations for women on boards.

The scant amount of research specifically focused on the topic of power, gender, and women leadership behaviors in top educational administration positions has suggested women board members and superintendents, more so than men board members and superintendents, tend to be relational and collaborative and tend to share power and seek multiple perspectives (Mullins, 1972, 1974) prior to decision making. Another study (Korshammer, 1985) on women leaders on community college boards and their use of power found that, while the women tended to approach decisions in a collaborative manner, "they were more likely than men to feel like outsiders and suffered from the feeling that they lacked a sufficient amount of power and control" (p. 48). Korshammer concluded "shared power and control requires that each person has an equal chance to influence outcomes" (p. 48) and further stated the link between outcomes and good working relationships is indisputable but highly improbable if opinions are not heard and valued equally by both genders.

Korshammer's (1995) findings on women's use of power elucidates the double-edged sword many women leaders, including women board members, must face if they approach decisions collaboratively. That is, although women leaders are often noted to involve others by seeking and valuing input from multiple and diverse stakeholders in the district and community while building and maintaining relationships with these stakeholders, some superintendents and others do not value this type of behavior, and some go so far as to consider it micromanagement and/or

intrusive. Ironically, women are often chastised for such behaviors, even though these decision-making behaviors have proven time and time again to increase support for school board policy decisions and tend to increase the level of parental involvement. The following section of the article examines this paradoxical phenomenon further.

*Women board members and communication.* Several studies, at times referred to as discourse studies, have been conducted on men and women's communication patterns. Perhaps the most frequent and significant finding from these studies is that men and women have different styles of speaking, and, ultimately, "these differences disadvantage women" (Helgeson 2002, p. 635). Helgeson articulated that communication studies typically suggest women are at a distinct disadvantage when speaking among men across various settings or contests, "including the intimate setting of marriage (see Fishman, 1990), the classroom (see Sadker & Sadker, 1985), and the corporate sphere (see Tannen, 1994)" (p.635). While the particular findings of each study varied slightly by context, the overall and consistent findings in these studies were that "men dominate conversations" (Donahue, 1997, p. 635).

In one study examining gendered communication behaviors during state legislator committee hearings, Kathlene (1994) found similar results, but added, "Even when there were fewer men than women at a committee hearing, men spoke more than women, entered the conversation earlier, and made more interruptions than did women" (p. 567). She also found that when the topic of the committee conversation is on a policy area of particular interest to women—family issues, for example—men still dominated the discourse.

While much of the research findings discussed so far has focused on women's communication behaviors compared with those of men in the same settings (Fishman, 1990; Sadker & Sadker, 1995; Tannen, 1990, 1994), only a handful of studies have focused on (a) the communication behavior of women at the school board table during decision-making processes when compared with men board members during decision-making processes (Donahue, 1997); (b) the relationship between the way women communicate at the board table and the level of influence their communications carry compared with the level of influence those of men school board members carry, in particular when men are simply repeating something a women has just stated (Eagly & Carli, 1987; James & Drakich 1993; Maltz & Borker, 1982); and, finally, (c) different characterizations of men and women board members when they seek input for decisions from the community (Mullins, 1972).

Donahue (1997) conducted a unique study on the communication patterns of men and women school board members as they made decisions

at the school board table. Using a random stratified sample of 423 school board members across the country, Donahue audiotaped 28 school board meetings of board to which one or more of the sample belonged (p. 636). Findings from the data showed men board members spoke significantly more than women board members in meetings, and men took about 14 turns talking while women took only nine turns. Men also made more motions, asked more questions, and made more requests for additional information than did women board members. Other findings from Donahue's study showed a 10-minute difference in the time men and women board members entered discussions, with men entering a conversation, on average, after 29 minutes and women entering 39 minutes from the conversation's beginning. Somewhat surprisingly, Donahue noted very few interruptions by men or women. Typically, the chair of the board interrupted the most and was the one most often interrupted. Donahue also noted "the chair was almost always male" (p. 639).

Another study that examined the relative amount of weight (importance or influence) afforded men compared with women when both sexes were saying virtually the same thing found that men tended to enjoy a higher status when they speak, especially if using quantity, or amounts of, and directives during formal structured conversations (James & Drakich, 1993), which men include in their conversations more than women. Other studies suggesting reasons women's speech is often devalued or less influential than that of men found that women tend to (a) focus on relationships over tasks (see Maltz & Borker, 1982), (b) use tentative or deferential speech (see Mulac, 1998), and (c) agree or conform to group pressures faster than their men counterparts (see Eagly & Carli, 1987). Still other studies examining what happens when men and women or women and women are basically saying the same thing, but one voice is devalued, found that women who use traditionally feminized language constructs tend to carry more influence during decision making over women who use nontraditional or masculinized language constructs (see Carli, 1999).

Finally, other studies have shown that women leaders are judged more harshly than men when performing the exact same communicative tasks. For example, Mullins (1972) found that, when interviewing over 500 men superintendents about their board members, the superintendents frequently characterized women board members as "micromanagers" or intrusive when describing how women board members liked to go out into the community to seek input for an upcoming board decision. However, when these same men superintendents described similar behaviors of their men board members, they characterized the behavior as positive.

Unlike other top-level leaders, a board member's individual opinion is just one among several board members. Ideally, each board member's opinion, leading toward a decision, would carry the same weight. However, previous studies have suggested that, in current Western culture, a White male's opinion carries the greatest weight and, thus, has greater influence on the final decision made by a mixed-gender and multiracial group. As noted earlier, several scholars have attempted to understand this phenomenon.

Some scholars have suggested that bias—as discussed in gender role and expectancy theories—and simple stereotyping are the primary reasons for different communication patterns exhibited by men and women (Acker, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Bem, 1992). Other scholars have suggested that communication patterns are not only androcentric, but also demonstrate that gender is inextricably linked to power and most often results in women's vocal space/influence being devalued or co-opted by men during decision-making processes (Brunner, 2000a, 2000b, 2002b; Donahue, 1997; Eagly & Carli, 1981; James & Drakich, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Mountford, 2001, 2004; Shakeshaft, 1986). Others have even gone so far as to suggest that gendered constructions of communication and decision making result in the silencing of women in order to minimize alternative points of view (Rusch & Marshall, 1996).

The following section of the article presents and discusses the theoretical perspectives used to ground the methods and design of the qualitative study conducted to explore the behavioral patterns and decision-making processes used by men and women school board members. The qualitative study conducted is unique because it focuses specifically on the behaviors related to voice and power of men and women school board members during their decision-making processes.

#### THE STUDY<sup>1</sup>: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES, METHODS, AND DESIGN

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact, relative to perceived voice and influence, of gender during school board decision making. Further, our study sought to reveal sources of oppression at the school board table and “to promote an understanding of the consequences of such oppression” (Sherman, 2005, p. 131). This qualitative study is a secondary analysis of a larger study (Mountford, 2001) that investigated many factors related to board member decision-making styles, such as motivation for board service and conceptions of power. The study yielded five factors that had a relationship to gender—motivation, power, decision making, vocal space/influence, and change. The study presented in

this article is a secondary analysis of that data using a poststructural feminist lens to explore vocal space/influence, decision making, and power behaviors by women and men school board members.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The secondary analysis of the data from the original study was driven theoretically by poststructural feminist theory and driven analytically by problem-based inquiry (Wolcott, 1972). According to Sherman (2005), this type of research is set apart because, "coupled with the act of inquiry, there is an underlying assumption on the part of the researcher that things are not right as they are or, most certainly, are not as good as they might be" (p. 15). Therefore, for this study, we reanalyzed the original data, which consisted of stories (responses to interview protocols) by men and women seated school board members about their experiences on the board, in particular while at the board table during the decision-making process. During the secondary analysis, we paid special attention to how the participants of the study talked about their vocal influence and how they believed their vocal space allowed or disallowed their constituents or their own voices to be heard during decision-making processes.

Through their stories, which were also triangulated with at least one board member colleague and their respective superintendents, we were able to better understand gender behavioral differences of men and women making decisions together at the board table. With our gender-specific findings, we hope to inform school board development and educational leadership programs about potential differences men and women exhibit during decision-making processes on mixed-gender boards and offer potential suggestions to avoid or perhaps even eliminate these differences entirely so conversations held by a man or woman are valued equally. Ultimately, the secondary analysis of the data was conducted to meet the purpose of research as asserted by Sherman (2005): "The avowed purpose of research is to bring about change directed at improvement" (p. 15).

## DESIGN AND METHODS<sup>2</sup> OF THE STUDY

Qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979) including semistructured and open-ended interviews, triangulation of all interviews, site documents, and continuous data analysis were utilized. During data analysis, continua and matrices were used to help gain a better understanding of emergent patterns and themes from the data, specifically as related to gender.

Reciprocity with participants in the form of continuous feedback during data analysis was conducted (Lather, 1991; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The following subsections describe sample selection and data collection methods.

*Sample selection.* To select the sample of board members for the study (their superintendents and board colleagues for triangulation purposes), 15 superintendents of school districts (a convenience sample) in a region in the Midwest were contacted. Of the 15 superintendents, 10 identified three to five board members from each of their respective boards who were interested in participating in the study. Next, the sample was narrowed to two board members from each of the 10 districts chosen for the study. An effort was made to represent rural, urban, and suburban districts with varying grade ranges and include board members who had held seats on the board for a minimum of five years. Further, an effort was made to ensure the sample of board members selected to participate in the study mirrored the demographics of the general population of board members across the country. Hess's (2002) study on board member demographics found that roughly 32% of board members were female and 68% were male and that board members were primarily White, other than a small percentage of board members from ethnic minorities, who typically served on urban boards. Hess's demographics also showed that board members across the country were employed in a wide range of positions, although the majority of board members held white-collar jobs and their socioeconomic status ranged from middle to upper-middle class, that most held a BS or BA degree, had at least one child in the district during their time of board service, and that most board members had been elected rather than appointed. These elected board members were equally self-nominated as they were nominated by someone else to serve on the boards used in this study.

The attempt to mirror the overall population of board members across the country to the participant sample yielded 20 board members: 9 women and 11 men, ranging in age between 32 and 65 years, predominantly White and middle to upper-middle class, all having a wide range of educational backgrounds and occupations, but similar to those reported in Hess's (2002) demographic study. Eighteen of the board members had at least one child in school at the time data was collected. Seventy percent had been elected and 30% had been appointed to their board service.

The demographics of superintendents of the 10 districts in which participant board members served were similar to the demographics reported in "The Study of the American Superintendency, 2000" (Glass et al., 2000). Eight superintendents from the 10 districts were male,

White, and between the ages of 45 and 60 years. All had either a specialist or PhD degree in educational leadership. The two women superintendents were White, aged 39 and 52 years, and both held doctorates in leadership. Of the 10 school districts used in the study, five were considered rural, four suburban, and one urban. It is important to note here that, while we had originally wanted to include board member participants from racial minorities, we were only able to find one male board member from a racial minority in our urban district. Unfortunately, this board member did not meet our term requirement of a minimum of five years of service and thus could not be included in the study.

*Data collection.* As previously described in an article by Mountford (2004) examining motivations for school board membership, the primary data collection consisted of interviews with the 20 participant school board members, interviews with at least one of the participant board members' colleagues, and interviews with the 10 superintendents of the school districts where the primary board members served, for a total of 50 interviews. Triangulation via interviews with the superintendent and a colleague of each participant board member was used to increase the validity of participants' self-reports (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) and, consequently, the validity of the findings. Interviews, most often conducted face to face in settings convenient for the participants, were a minimum of an hour in length and ranged from semistructured to open-ended to elicit thick descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reciprocity, as described by Lather (1991), was accomplished with participants through discussions, written feedback on transcripts, and additional feedback during early data analysis. In addition, we conducted examinations of written documents such as school board meeting agendas, minutes, board member voting patterns, and media accounts of board meetings to corroborate interview data and examine communication patterns.

To determine how participants conceptualized and enacted power, Brunner's (1998b, 2002b) power interview protocol (used during her studies of superintendents' conceptions and uses of power) was duplicated: (a) How do you define power? (b) How do you make decisions? (c) How do you get things done? Other questions posed to participants in Mountford's (2001) original study asked participants to determine how board members communicated with staff and administration and how they gathered information for decision making: (a) How often are you in the school buildings? (b) How often do you communicate with the staff and administration, and what is the nature of those communications? We also used probes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) to gain a deeper understanding of participants' use of vocal space/influence: (a) Do you feel your opinions and what you say during

decision-making processes are listened to and valued? (b) With respect to your board colleagues, do you feel your input is less, equal to, or more valued during decision making? (c) During board meetings, do you speak as often, less, or more than your board colleagues? Why or why not? Board participants were asked to provide concrete examples of their responses to most interview questions.

*Data analysis.* During our secondary analysis of data from the original study (Mountford, 2001), the narrative responses from participant board members were disaggregated by gender to explore for similarities or differences in the way men board members and women board members defined power, made decisions, and expressed their sense of vocal space/influence at the board table while making decisions. The second step in data analysis was an analysis of the narrative data using theoretical lenses grounded in both poststructural feminism and earlier research on board member behaviors and communication patterns. The secondary analysis led to the creation of three different continua with opposing end categories. The names chosen for the ends of each continuum emerged from the analysis and subsequent coding process and were consistent with prior research on (a) vocal space/influence during decision making—*high vocal* and *low vocal* (Acker, 1992; Belenky et al., 1986; Bem, 1992; Brunner, 2000a, 2000b; Gilligan, 1982; Johnson, 1996; Mountford, 2001; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; Mullins, 1972; National School Boards Association [NSBA], 1974; Rusch & Marshall, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1986; Tallerico, 1992; Tannen, 1990), (b) school board members' decision-making patterns—*micromanager* and *collaborator* (Donahue, 1974; McCurdy, 1992; Mountford, 2001; Mountford, 2004; Mullins, 1972, 1974; NSBA, 1974), and (c) opposing conceptions of power in educational administration literature—*power over* and *power with* (Arendt, 1972; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Brunner, 1998a, 1998b, 2002b; Brunner & Schumaker, 1998; Follett, 1942; Mintzberg, 1983; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; Sergiovanni 1991, 2000).

The continua were used to map out and analyze board members' narrative data compared with those from other board member participants of the study. This analysis tool also served as a way to display the findings as they related to (a) the amount of vocal space/influence board members had during decision-making processes (the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum), (b) the way they made decisions (the Decision-Making Continuum), and (c) the way they conceptualized power (the Power Continuum). To maintain the integrity of the use of continua for data analysis in the original study (Mountford, 2001) and as stated in a previous article:

the continua were purposely constructed without numerical segments so they could be considered sliding scales rather than numerical scales in order to represent behaviors that are fluid and context dependent behaviors.... In other words, the continua were used to analyze and depict approximate ranges of board participants' behavior tendencies rather than exact, rigid patterns of behavior. (Mountford, 2004, p. 715)

Using the narrative data, each of the 20 board members was placed on each of the three continua. Markers for each participant were used to keep track of the placement of board members and to separate participants by gender. Each marker represented a participant board member of the study and included the participant's code number, an "f" or "m" indicating sex; a vertical line pattern within the marker distinguished a man board member, and a horizontal line pattern within each marker indicated a woman board member. Finally, in order to fit the markers across each continuum, men board members were consistently placed above the continua and women board members were placed beneath the continua. When positioning participants on the continua, our interpretation of the data was increased by employing and training two independent analysts to follow the same procedure, that is, to interpret what they had read and position each participant somewhere on each of the three continua. The positions of the participants on each continuum by the two independent analysts were then compared with our positions. The similarity of the results across all four analysts provided evidence that the process for interpreting data and positioning participants on the three continua was reliable. In the few cases of disagreement among researchers and analysts, a final positioning of the participant was achieved by averaging the four placements (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3). For a more detailed description of the analysis process and construction and use of the continua (see Mountford, 2001, 2004).

Once board members were plotted on each continuum, relationships between the board members' vocal space/influence, decision making, and conceptions of power were examined. To accomplish this analysis, first, we crossed the plotted Power Continuum with the plotted Decision-Making Continuum to create a 2 ´ 2 matrix that displays the placement of all participants within the matrix (see Figure 4). Next, the plotted Vocal Space/Influence Continuum was crossed first with the plotted Power Continuum and then with the plotted Decision-Making Continuum (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). The final step in data analysis

was to analyze all three continua (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3) and the three matrices (Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6) for patterns related to gendered behavior differences.

## FINDINGS

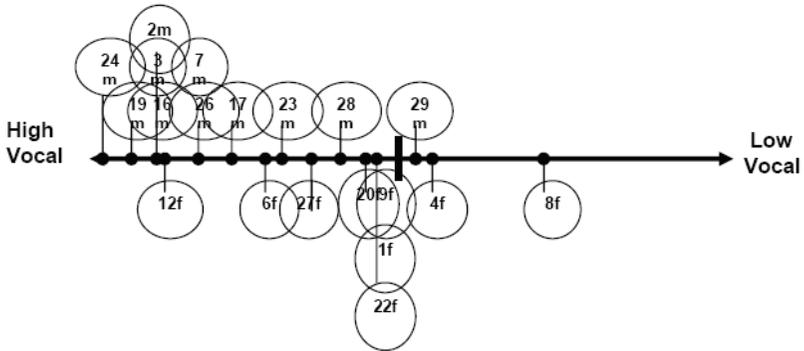
The findings portion of the paper is divided into four major sections: (a) Vocal Space/Influence, (b) Approaches to Decision Making, (c) Power, and (d) Relationships among Power, Decision-Making, Vocal Space/Influence, and Gender. Each of these sections concludes with findings on gender and how gender related to each of the factors analyzed. Within each of the first three major sections, each respective plotted continuum is shown (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3), and narrative excerpts from board member participants and/or narrative excerpts from the interviews with the board members' colleagues and superintendents are provided. This organization allows us to illustrate the range and context of the participants' responses while simultaneously demonstrating support for their final placement on the three continua. In addition, the fourth section displays three matrices that were constructed by crossing the three plotted continua. Each matrix is discussed in terms of emergent relational patterns between and among the three behavior factors analyzed—power, decision making, and vocal space/influence (see Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6).

### VOCAL SPACE/INFLUENCE

Findings of the study related to the level of voice and/or the influence our board members believed they had on the board are presented first in two subsections. The section ends with a discussion of the findings and gender. Narrative data excerpts from our interviews with the primary board members, a board colleague, and their superintendents are provided to help the reader understand and support the board members placement on the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum, which precedes the discussion of findings (see Figure 1).

*High vocal board members.* Almost all of the board members in this study, 17 of 20, self-reported or were reported by others as being high vocal to varying degrees. Ten of the 11 men board members and 7 of the 9 women board members were ultimately placed on the high vocal side of the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum. Board members who were plotted on this side of the continuum not only reported talking a lot at board meetings and within the community, but also felt that they were listened to and heavily influenced others' opinions. For example, when Board

Figure 1. The Vocal Space/Influence Continuum



Member 24m from a large suburban district (who was placed at the most extreme end on the high vocal side of the continuum) was asked how much influence he had at the board table he stated:

Well, I am more vocal than most. I am not afraid to share my opinion. I think that everybody's opinion counts and that's why you're here—to represent different aspects and different sides to a situation. So, if I don't share my opinion, then what value am I bringing? So I do share my opinion, so I am probably one of the more vocal board members, and when it comes to influence, I feel I have a considerable amount of influence on the board.  
[Board Member 24m]

Board Member 24m, clearly an openly vocal and self-proclaimed highly influential board member, appears to believe that his role as a board member is to represent different aspects or sides of a situation, yet the above narrative suggests 24m is most interested in representing his own opinion. He talked not about representing his constituents' viewpoints, but rather about representing his own side of issues. Narrative data from a later portion of the interview with 24m illustrates this point further and provides a perspective on what it might be like to be a board colleague of 24m. Later in our interview, he stated the following:

If I know there's somebody else in the room that kind of feels opposite of me, I'll acknowledge that and at least show them that I understand where they're coming from, but, here's the way I feel and why I feel that way. And, at times, I think that has kind

of a soothing affect on other board members, and I think that, at times, it will help them maybe say, “Oh, okay, well, I wasn’t looking at it that way,” and move on. [Board Member 24m]

This board member’s communication skills appear to be consistent with his approach to decision making—an approach later characterized in this study as micromanagement. Micromanagement, frequently found in school board literature, is a term used to describe management tactics in which the “boss” keeps a close watch on the details of a project, sometimes even directing the smallest details. In some cases, micromanagers issue orders to employees not under their purview or sanctioned by their superior, or in the case of board members, directives not sanctioned (and in some cases, not even known about) by the superintendent or board colleagues (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; McCurdy, 1992).

For example, even though 24m professed to be mostly interested in policy issues, the superintendent of 24m described him as a micromanager, and later interviews with board colleagues revealed that they believed Board Member 24m frequently overstepped his boundaries—a behavior consistent with a micromanagement approach to decision making. Interestingly, regardless of these opinions, Board Member 24m ultimately became president of the board during the course of this study. It appears as though his self-reported use of vocal influence as well as corroborating board minutes and ultimately his election to board president are suggestive that he used his vocal influence in charismatic ways. However, many of the narratives also indicated that he used his voice in dominating or patronizing ways—ways that could easily silence or intimidate other colleagues at the table. Further, through observations of his communicative behaviors during board meetings, we came to understand that Board Member 24m’s usual practice was to ask others for their opinions at the board table, but then to do what he called “moving on.” Moving on for this board member meant disregarding his colleagues’ input and charismatically convincing them to agree with the opinion he held prior to the meeting.

Commonly, board members in the study indicated they were proud of the large amount of vocal space they occupied on the board, particularly during decision-making processes. They often exhibited pride in the fact that they exerted higher levels of influence than others on the board. For example, Board Member 19m described these factors in competitive ways when he stated,

I think I’m very vocal, but I don’t think people feel that I impose my view on them necessarily.... But, I think I take a lot of pride.

To myself, I know that every decision that I have voted on in the last six years has turned out. I voted in the majority on every one of them, and I feel they were all the right ones.... They weren't all unanimous either, and some of those decisions, if I had switched or not led in a certain way, obviously would have gone the other way, so I think, yeah, I'm pretty vocal. [Board Member 19m]

Typically, there was agreement across what self-reports, board colleagues, and superintendents said about individual board members' level of vocal space/influence—especially for board members who were high vocal. While these examples imply a fairly negative portrait of high vocal board members, other board colleagues and superintendents often made positive remarks about how high vocal colleagues used their vocal space/influence to impact decisions. For example, one superintendent said the following about the way Board Member 6f used her vocal space/influence at the board table:

I think, you know, I think her [vocal space/influence] on the board, so to speak, is effective because she's not overly vocal, and she's not redundant, and she just lets the others talk, and then she will either, she'll very effectively convey her support or non-support of an issue. She cuts right to the chase. [Superintendent describing Board Member 6f]

The majority of the participants in this study were placed on the high vocal end of the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum, indicating many board members use their vocal space/influence to impact the agenda as well as final decisions and further suggesting that, in most cases, competition for vocal space at the board table is a likely event. This finding helps us understand better the well-documented struggles, tensions, and, in some cases, vicious debates characteristic of some local school board meetings (McCurdy, 1992; Mountford, 2006).

*Low vocal board members.* Only 3 of the 20 board members in this study considered themselves to be or were reported to be low vocal. Low vocal space/influence in this study was characterized by participants who reported they were often quiet at board meetings and/or rarely consulted with constituents in the community to access constituent input. These board members were also perceived to be low vocal by colleagues and their respective superintendents. The term low vocal was also used to describe individuals who reported they had been silenced by other board members and/or their superintendents or that they lacked the influence

they thought they wanted to have as a board member. For example, Board Member 8f, who was placed closest to the end of the low vocal side of the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum, felt she had been silenced by other board members and the superintendent during the beginning of her board service. She stated the following:

So, at the next meeting, I brought this issue [a policy issue] up again. I was yelled at more loudly and more severely than I had ever been yelled at in a public arena in my life. "What did I think I was doing?" "Did I think nobody had been doing their job for past 30 years?" "What was I thinking to dare ask for a policy manual?" My own father never yelled at me that loudly. [Board Member 8f]

While Board Member 8f expressed feeling silenced on the board, her colleagues and superintendent did not agree. In fact, in almost every situation where a board member had described themselves as low vocal, colleagues and/or board superintendents reacted negatively. For example, the superintendent of board member 8f said the following about 8f's use of vocal space/influence:

There are times when it's one of her issues, and she is verbal, but she's very ineffective. The board just kind of shakes their heads saying, "We already know where you are." Nine out of 10 times she lays back, she says her piece, it's very effective and helpful in terms of clarifying board's positions. And then there are other times when she'll get some public discussion of something that does not serve her or the board very well. [Superintendent describing Board Member 8f]

This type of triangulated data, as well as board minutes from participants' respective districts, was used to increase the validity of the placement process of participants on the continua and in this case, help to explain why 8f was not placed at the extreme low vocal end of the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum.

Another example of a negative reaction about a self-reported low vocal board member came from a colleague of Board Member 4f: "She will let an issue stay on the table forever without offering any input or help moving the agenda item along. What added value is she really?" In this case, a misunderstanding about why 4f was fairly quiet had occurred. While 4f had earlier reported being more of a listener than a talker, her board colleague perceived this behavior as one that slowed the decision-making

process and had little added value. Similarly, the superintendent of 29m commented, “[Board Member 29m] only gives input on issues in which he thinks he has some expertise.... And that no one knows more than him.” In this case, even though Board Member 29m considered himself fairly quiet, it is clear he did speak if he was interested in a particular item. Therefore, due to such conflicting reports, these board members were placed near the middle of the continuum on the low vocal end. Further, it is important to note that, in all three cases, board colleagues and superintendents reacted negatively when hearing their colleagues or board member believed themselves to be “low vocal” board members.

*Vocal space/influence and gender.* Even though most board members in this study reported themselves to be highly vocal, a clear relationship between gender and vocal space/influence emerged. As shown in Figure 1, the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum, the men board members are more tightly clustered at the far end of the highly vocal side of the continuum. In fact, eight men board members appear to be competing for the extreme high vocal point on the continuum. Women, however, are clustered near the middle of the continuum, suggesting they are less vocal (or only moderately vocal) and/or inconsistent in their amount of vocal space/influence at the board table. The final placement of board members on the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum suggests that women perceived they had less influence than men board members in terms of vocal space/influence at the board table.

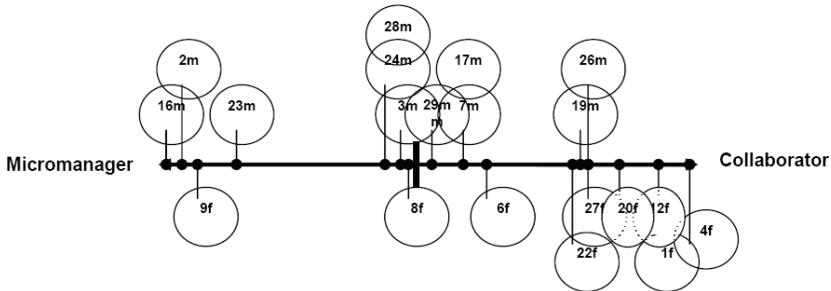
The findings from this portion of the study tend to agree with other research on women involved in mixed-gender groups and the use of voice or vocal space/influence we reviewed earlier. That is, it appears natural and expected that men will dominate vocal space in mixed-gender groups (Bem, 1993, Tannen, 1990; 1994,).

## APPROACHES TO DECISION MAKING

The following subsections discuss all the categories of our findings related to decision making (see Figure 2). The final part of this section discusses the patterns we found specific to the relationship between genders and decision making.

*Micromanagement approach to decision making.* Through self-reports and triangulated interviews, 8 (2 women and 6 men) out of the 20 board members, to varying degrees, approached decisions as micromanagers and were ultimately placed on the micromanager side of the Decision-Making Continuum. Board members who were plotted on this side of the continuum discussed their role as board members as being “heavily involved in decisions,” “hands-on,” or as needing to keep tabs on the day-

Figure 2. The Decision-Making Continuum



to-day operations of the district—characteristics commonly considered those of micromanagers (Hess, 2002; Mountford, 2004; Mountford & Brunner, 2001; McCurdy, 1992; Mullins, 1972, 1974; NSBA, 1974). For example, when high vocal Board Member 24m was asked how frequently he communicated with the superintendent, he stated,

I talk to the superintendent daily to three to four times a week. We get together to talk about the agenda, and we've done a couple of things since I've become president that I've always wanted to do. [Board Member 24m]

While frequent communication can be viewed as a positive behavior by board members, Board Member 24m was extreme in his communications with the superintendent and his influence over the development of the board meeting agendas. In fact, when a colleague of 24m was asked how she perceived his approach to decision making and level of involvement, she stated, "I would say he's perceived by board members, administrators, and staff members as overstepping his lines of authority and as a micromanager." Further, when 24m's superintendent was asked the same question, he responded,

I think he keeps his fingertips on it [daily operations of the district], but he also knows in the back of his mind that he is supposed to be the policy maker, and he, especially with the public, does draw that distinction. But, I think he does keep one eye out on the things that are happening on a day-to-day basis. [Board Member 24m's superintendent]

The preceding narrative indicates that 24m's superintendent views him

as a micromanager; the superintendent's narrative also suggests another problem frequently associated with micromanagers, that is, role confusion (Boyd, 1975; Carver, 1991, 1997; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Mountford, 2001, 2004, 2008). While most trainers and manuals explain that school board members are responsible for policy development and not the day-to-day operations of the district, some board members appear to be confused as to what exactly this advice means in terms of their daily board behaviors.

This role confusion was evident in 24m's behaviors. While board minutes and observations of Board Member 24m indicated he was high vocal and "kept his fingertips on the daily operations of the district," the corroborative data also suggested that, although he was heavily involved in policy issues, the majority of his efforts were invested in the day-to-day management of the district. Therefore, though classified as a micromanager, 24m was plotted toward the middle of the micromanager side of the Decision-Making Continuum.

Another micromanagement approach to decision making was characterized by board members who became heavily involved or opinionated at times when specific issues about which they cared were before the board. For example, when Board Member 16m was asked how he approached an upcoming vote or decision, he stated, "I only get involved in issues I know something about or am interested in." When combining triangulation data combined with 16m's tendency to define power as the "control of others," we concluded that he used micromanagement techniques as his decision-making approach if an issue (whether it be policy or operational) was important to him. Otherwise, it seemed he was characterized by others as somewhat "disinterested."

Ultimately, the commonalities among the four participants who were placed near the far end of the micromanager side of the Decision-Making Continuum were as follows: (a) frequent communication with the superintendent, (b) consistently spent a considerable amount of time in one or more of the school buildings, (c) at times attempted to issue directives to staff and faculty rather than seek input, (d) showed interest in daily operations of the district, and (e) showed interest in issues related to their own children rather than in policy development.

Eight out of the 20 board members in the study, almost half, exhibited varying degrees of micromanagement behaviors—ones that have been shown to cause conflict and to strain the relationship between superintendents and board members (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; McCurdy, 1992; Mountford, 2001, 2004, 2008). However, the other 12 board members in this study approached decisions very differently.

*Collaborative approaches to decision making.* Twelve of the 20 board mem-

bers (7 women and 5 men) in this study approached decisions collaboratively. In most cases, they described their decision-making tendencies by saying, “It’s important to gain input from those most affected by the outcome of our decision,” or “I really work at respecting and honoring the viewpoints of all of the other board members.” Several also noted the importance of being good listeners. These board members often promoted the common objectives of the organization rather than their own agendas. Therefore, they were placed at various places on the collaborative side of the Decision-Making Continuum (see Figure 2).

During interviews, the 12 board members ultimately categorized as collaborative described their approaches to decision making in various ways. For example, 20f said,

In order to make a decision, I’d say you probably take into consideration an array of things—hopefully, wisdom from other people and then what you have to do. You have to come down to listening to the administration, listening to your colleagues, and then you just have to make a choice. By the time we get to the decision, we have been in so many meetings and discussed so much, I’m sure that people who watch our board meetings think we are rubber stamps. That is not true. I mean there are many hours of discussion, you know, going home. A lot of times there will be some situation, and we’ll walk away from it until another meeting. [Board Member 20f]

Board Member 20f viewed her role as a collaborative problem-solver working in tandem with the administration and her board colleagues. When the superintendent was asked how 20f made decisions, she responded,

Collaboration, I think, probably is a huge issue for her in the way she goes about making a decision. I guess, you know, the whole collaborative spirit of trying to problem solve, and that is the way I would characterize her approach to decision making. [Superintendent describing Board Member 20f]

While 20f valued a collaborative spirit during decision making, another board member who was also placed on the collaborator side of the continuum, 1f, characterized her approach to decision-making with language that advanced the need for multiple opinions. She said,

You can make a decision by wisely considering what the situation

is and then the other part, being very, very respectful of the administration's point of view and all their work, that's what they're paid to do. We're not paid to figure. They're paid to do the details. The other part of it is to pay particular attention to my esteemed colleagues, my other board members. Each one of them has such a vast array of knowledge. The power behind our school board is that they all come from different places. Each one has certain things that they do well, to listen to them, and that's how I come to a decision. Being very respectful of what's presented. [Board Member 1f]

The interview with the superintendent corroborated 1f's behaviors:

When she approaches a decision, generally, she'll bring issues to me that have come to her attention through her constituents or through her own concern, and she does so in a manner that she is asking questions, and she's not mandating action. She's asking and suggesting to me and inquiring whether or not we've considered different angles and different options. [Board Member 1f's Superintendent]

Even though 1f appeared to be in contact with the superintendent directly about her own or her constituents' concerns, her superintendent did not seem to feel it was intrusive or conflict-laden communication, but rather thought it was an attempt to gain information to help solve common organizational problems.

*Decision making and gender.* Although the sample is small and tendencies cannot be generalized, interesting patterns emerged in this study related to differences in the way men and women board members approached decision-making processes. Placement of board members on the continuum illustrate that seven of nine women board members approached decisions collaboratively, compared with only 5 of 11 men board members who did so. Men in this study were more likely than women to micromanage. Of the nine women involved in the study, only one (9f) exhibited strong tendencies to micromanage.

These findings suggest that, when compared with men, women board members may be more likely to approach decisions collaboratively or seek input and advice from constituents. Further, if we look at Brunner's (2001) comparative findings related to women and men superintendents' decision-making practices, we find a similar pattern. Brunner's (2001) study found that only 6 of the 21 men superintendents approached decisions collaboratively, compared with 17 of 19 of the

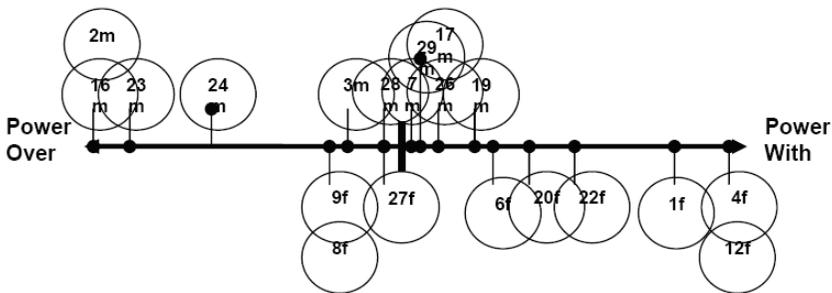
women superintendents who did so. The remaining superintendents were found to be top-down, non-collaborative leaders (Brunner, 2001).

Another pattern emerged in terms of the differences in the way men and women board members approached decisions and could easily be detected by noticing where each group was plotted on the continuum. Women board members tended to be clustered near the far end of the collaborator side of the Decision-Making Continuum, where as men were clustered in three primary locations; the far end of the micromanager side, the middle of the full continuum, and near the middle of the collaborator side of the Decision-Making Continuum. This pattern of placement of board members showed that half of the men in this study approached decisions either collaboratively or as micromanager, but more than half of the men approached decisions using both styles or were inconsistent in their approaches. Again, not unlike earlier research on this topic, we found that women, in the main, tended to approach decisions collaboratively.

### CONCEPTIONS OF POWER<sup>3</sup>

This section of the article discusses our findings related to board members' conceptions of power (see Figure 3). This section concludes with findings related to gender and the differences in the way men and women tended to use the power they held as a board member.

Figure 3. The Power Continuum<sup>4</sup>



*Power over conceptualizations.* Data from self-reports and triangulated interviews suggested that 9 out of the 20 board members (6 men and 3 women) defined power as authority, control, or influence over others. “When asked to define power, these board members gave definitions such as ‘globally, it’s probably the authority, the right, or the approval to

make decisions, control people, that sort of thing,' (Board Member 23m) or, 'the control of others' (Board Members 2m and 16 m)" (Mountford, 2004, p. 728). Typically, board members plotted on the power over side of the Power Continuum (see Figure 3) described their roles as being "in charge," "powerful," or at the "top" of a "chain of command." Figure 3 shows specifically where each board member who held conceptions of power as power over was placed on the Power Continuum. Three participants (all men) were placed near the extreme left end of the Power Continuum because their definitions of power and triangulated perceptions of how they might define power were tightly focused on control or authority. (For additional narrative examples and fuller discussion of board members perceptions of power, see Mountford, 2004.)

*Power with conceptualizations.* Eleven of the 20 board member participants (6 men and 5 women) defined power as power with others or as using their power to empower others: "For example, Board Member 1f defined power as 'Power is coming together for the common good,' or Board Member 12f, who defined power as 'working together to help others'" (Mountford, 2004, p. 729). In addition, their board colleagues and superintendent consistently reported that these board members typically behaved collaboratively and did not seem interested in wielding the positional power they had as board members. These three board members (all women) were near the extreme right end on the power with side of the Power Continuum (see Figure 3).

The other eight board members (5 men and 3 women) placed on the power with side of the Power Continuum—but closer to the middle—gave definitions of power primarily composed of words or phrases associated with collaboration or power used to promote others' needs. However, their definitions also contained words or phrases more characteristic of power over definitions, suggesting they believed their positional power gave them the opportunity to be change agents. For example, 19m began his definition of power by stating, "I think power is when you are in a position to make things happen," but then continued with the following statement about power: "And that's not abusing that position, and I think I'm a person who believes in building consensus." Triangulation data about 19m suggested that he pushed hard (was high vocal) about certain agenda items and, at times, used his voice to dominate the decision-making process. In addition, articles in the newspapers about this district's board meetings quoted or discussed 19m almost twice as often as any other member of the board. Therefore, while he defined power as power with, he sometimes behaved in a power over manner and was, therefore, placed near the middle on the power with side of the Power Continuum. Other board members who gave similar or somewhat

mixed definitions or were inconsistent regarding their behaviors and their definitions of power were also placed near the mid-range of the Power Continuum. (For additional narrative examples and fuller discussion, see Mountford, 2004.)

*Power and gender.* Patterns emerged in this study related to differences in the way men and women board members defined power. Six of the nine women board members in this study offered a power with conception of power, while 5 of the 11 men board members defined power as with others. Similarly, three out of nine women board members defined power as over others, while 6 of the 11 men board members stated a power over definition.

The use of the Power Continuum, both as a tool for analysis and a way to display our findings, distinctly illuminated potentially elusive findings. Three women board members were clustered near the far end of the power with side of the continuum, while 3 others were plotted near the middle of the power with side of the Power Continuum. The remaining 3 women were plotted on the power over side of the continuum but fairly close to the power with side of the continuum. Conversely, men board members tended to be placed either near the middle of the Power Continuum or near the end of the power over or the power with side of the continuum. This finding suggests that men tended to be more ambiguous about their conceptions of power. Many of their definitions had elements of both power over and power with conceptions; thus, many of the men in the study were plotted near the middle of the continuum. Women board members were most often plotted toward the power with end of the Power Continuum in clusters of three. While it is difficult to know for certain with such a small sample size, this study suggests that fewer women than men hold mixed definitions of power.

The findings on power and school board members suggest that women are more likely than men to give an ontological definition of power that would be considered power with. Again, this finding corresponds to the studies of gender and power reviewed earlier and closely corresponds with Brunner's (2001) findings on the way superintendents conceive of and wield power.

#### POWER, DECISION MAKING, VOCAL SPACE/INFLUENCE, AND GENDER

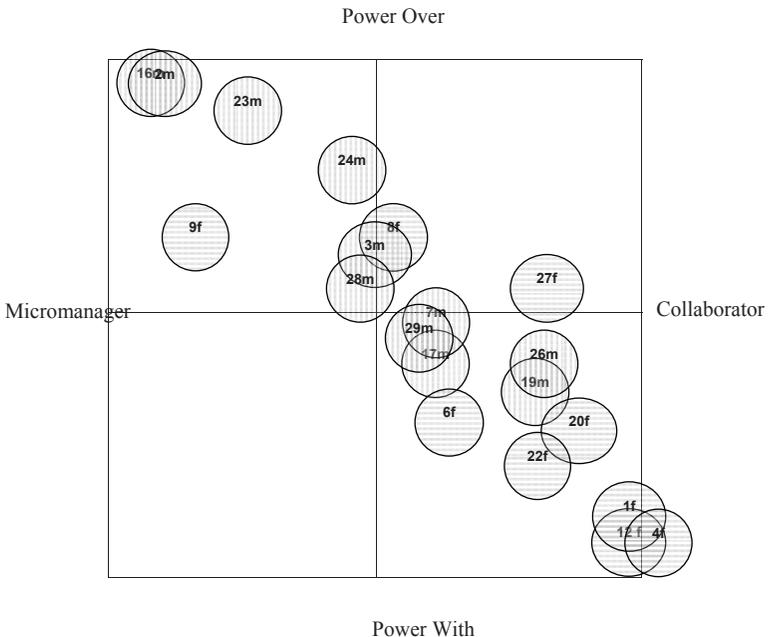
To attain a deeper understanding of the relationships among the board behavioral factors we analyzed—vocal space/influence, decision making, power and gender—and because the data repeatedly suggested these three factors were inextricably linked to each other, we crossed the three

continua to create three 2 X 2 matrices. The construction of the matrices allowed us to analyze each behavioral factor and its relationship, if any, to the other two behavioral factors. Three separate matrices resulted: (a) the Power and Decision-Making Matrix, (b) the Power and Vocal space/influence Matrix, and (c) the Decision-Making and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix (see Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6). In each of the subsequent subsections, the findings related to the board members' narrative data and any relationships between the three factors and gender are discussed.

*Gender, decision making, and power.* Figure 4, the Power and Decision-Making Matrix, displays the intersection of the plotted Power Continuum and the plotted Decision-Making Continuum. Analysis of the intersection of the two continua elucidated emergent relational patterns among three factors: (a) the way board members defined power, (b) the way board members approached decisions, and (c) the way decision making and power related to gender.

The Power and Decision-Making matrix (see Figure 4) demonstrates a relationship between the way board members defined power and how they approached decision making. Eight of the nine board members who defined power as power over also used a micromanagement approach to decision making. Board members in this study who held power over def-

Figure 4. The Power and Decision-Making Matrix



initions were very anxious to know about the day-to-day district operations and were often physically present in district school buildings. For example, Board Member 23m (quoted earlier), who defined power as “globally, it’s probably the authority, the right, or the approval to make decisions, control people, that sort of thing,” later noted the importance of the superintendent’s responsibility to keep him informed. He stated,

It’s [the relationship between the superintendent and the board member] got to be a partnership, the superintendent has to keep the board informed on student issues, teacher issues, building issues, and to me if a superintendent doesn’t do that they’re not worth their weight.... Depending upon what’s going on, I could be in the building twice a week. Sometimes it could be three times a week; sometimes it could be twice in a day. Other times it’s a weekly, you know. It just depends upon what’s going on. [Board Member 23m]

Board Member 23m’s narrative indicates that, while he considered his relationship with the superintendent to be a partnership, he also expressed his expectations of the superintendent in a power over manner. Further, 23m not only needed to stay well informed but also was frequently in the buildings to see what was occurring. Board members with these attitudes and actions are typically classified as micromanagers. This is one example of the intersection of a power over conception with a micromanagement approach to decision making.

Board members who defined power as power with were much more likely to approach decisions collaboratively. All but one of the board members in this study defined power as power with and approached decisions in a collaborative manner. When discussing power and decision making as it related to her work with the superintendent, 12f stated,

From my standpoint, I like to stay away from power. I find it offensive to think that we have something over someone. What we have is the ability to work together. [Board Member 12f]

Board member 12f did not define power in a power over manner and was more interested in working collaboratively with others.

In brief, the Decision-making and Power Matrix illustrates that all of the men who defined power as power over, also used a micromanagement approach to decision making in varying degrees, and all but one of the women board members who defined power as power with, also approached decisions collaboratively. In order to further substantiate this

finding we examined the outcomes of Brunner's (2001) study of superintendents and power. When she examined relationships between the way superintendents defined power and the way they made decisions, Brunner found that of the 40 superintendents she interviewed, 17 superintendents (15 men/2 women) defined power as power over were—by self-reports and others' perceptions—top-down leaders, and the remaining 23 (6 men and 17 women) who defined power as power with were self-reported and perceived by others to be collaborative decision makers.

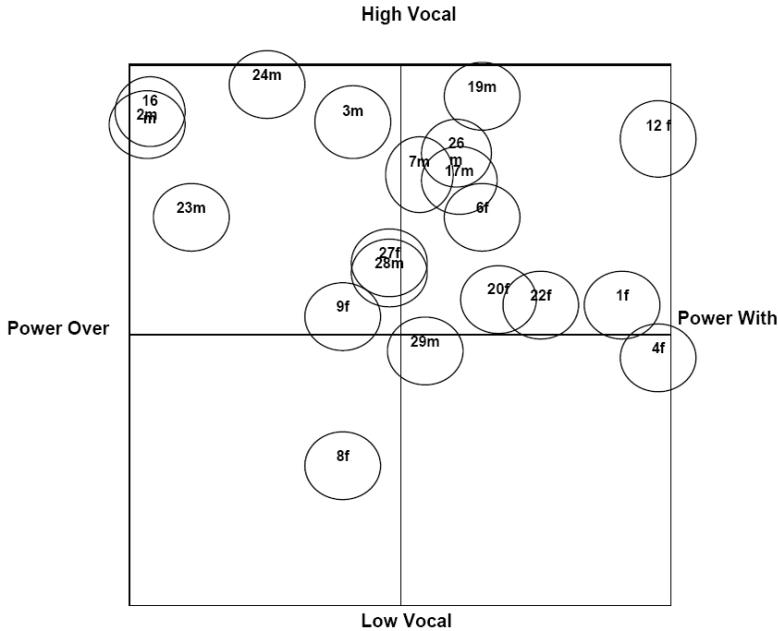
Combining Brunner's (1998a, 1998b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002a, 2002b) and Mountford's (2001, 2004, 2008) findings on gender, power, and decision making adds a significant addition to scant preexisting literature on the topic of power, decision making, and gender in school governance (Bell & Chase, 1993; Bourisaw, 2005; Danzberger et al., 1992; Deckman; 2007; Follett, 1942; Sergiovanni, 2000). While both studies used in-depth interviews to gather the primary data for their respective studies, thus limiting sample size, an analysis of data from both studies demonstrates a significant relationship between power and decision making and differences between genders. With this demonstration, the researchers have not only added fresh information on the different ways men and women practice leadership, but have also elucidated an area of school board member and superintendent training that should be added to existing development programs for top-level school leaders.

*Gender, power, and vocal space/influence.* The Power and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix (see Figure 5) was created by intersecting the Power Continuum with the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum. This matrix was used to analyze the relationship between a board member's conception of power and how much vocal space/influence they had, or were perceived to have, on the board.

The Power and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix (see Figure 5) does not reveal the same close relationships among the factors and gender as does the Power and Decision-Making Matrix. However, the matrix shows the majority of the study's participants were high vocal and almost evenly split with regard to their conceptions of power.

An analysis of this intersection suggests that a person's conception of power has little or no relationship to how verbal they are at the board table. Nine high vocal board members defined power as power with, and eight defined it as power over. Only three board members considered themselves low vocal, and two of these board members defined power as power with. The third board member, 8f, who self-reported being low vocal, defined power as power over and believed she had been silenced by her superintendent and board colleagues.

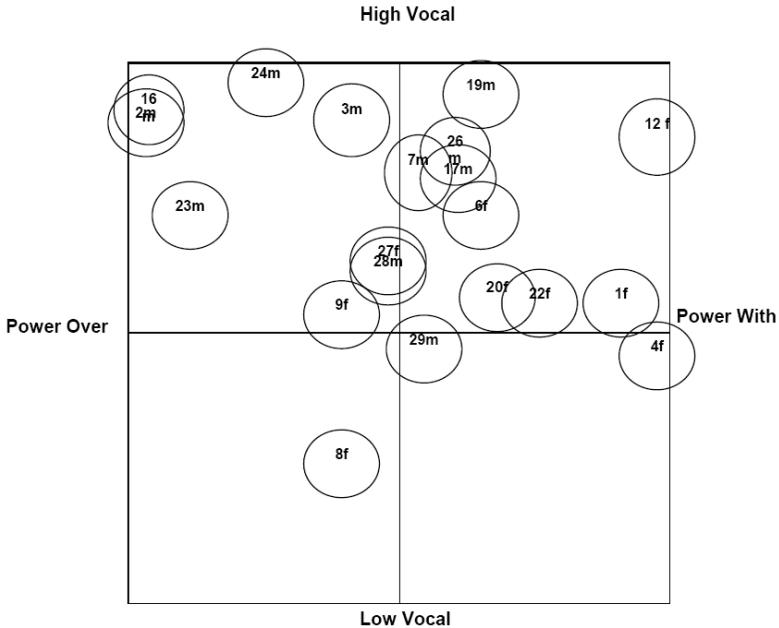
Figure 5. The Power and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix



The Power and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix (see figure 5) also shows that men board members were more likely than women board members to be at the extreme end of high vocal and were more likely to define power as power over. This finding indicates a relationship between the three behavioral factors (power, decision making, and vocal space/influence) and gender at the board table. The conjoining of the relationship between the three factors and gender with the finding that men are more prone than women to micromanage suggests the likelihood that board decision-making processes not only included more men, but also were significantly dominated by men.

Further, findings from this matrix indicate that women are moderately vocal more often than men board members. While women were plotted on the high vocal side of the Voice Continuum, the majority of them were still “less vocal” than their men counterparts. Of the seven women board members who were moderately vocal, five defined power as power with. This finding is significant particularly when juxtaposed with the earlier finding that women who defined power as power with tended to make decisions collaboratively. These findings cause us to question how women

Figure 6. The Decision-Making and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix



who are moderately vocal and make decisions collaboratively are able to impact a decision-making process that is dominated by very vocal, micro-managing men.

*Gender, vocal space/influence, and decision making.* Finally, we crossed the Decision-Making Continuum with the Vocal Space/Influence Continuum to form the Decision-Making and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix (see Figure 6).

By crossing the Decision-Making and Vocal Space/Influence Continua, we found that 10 of the 17 board members in this study who were moderately to high vocal approached decisions collaboratively, and the remaining 7 who were moderately to high vocal used micromanagement as their approach to decision making.

In this study, board members who reported stronger interest in listening over talking (which was confirmed in triangulation) fell into the lower right quadrant of the Decision-Making and Vocal Space/Influence Matrix after the respective continua were crossed. These participants tended to be less vocal than others and more likely to approach decisions collaboratively. As stated previously, only 3 of the 20 board members in this study, 2 women and 1 man, were low vocal or felt they had been silenced. Two of these board members (4f and 29m) were more likely to

approach decisions collaboratively. In fact, 4f said she was not very verbal because she wanted to listen to what others had to say before she spoke. She stated,

I'm not the most vocal.... Personally, I think as an individual I tend to be a person who listens and absorbs and thinks about things. I try not to just, you know, speak out without kind of thinking about something first. Then, I have more information to help me make a decision. [Board Member 4f]

The last of the three low vocal participants (8f), who tended to be mixed in her approach to decision making, was ultimately categorized as a micromanager and felt silenced on the board. She reported that board members sometimes “rolled their eyes” when she started talking. She recalled,

After a while, I just quit talking. I noticed that some board members did this [rolled eyes] to audience members when they thought they were nuts. It made me feel bad, and I am looking forward to finishing my board service. They don't want to hear what I have to say anyway. [Board Member 8f]

During triangulation, 8f's superintendent reported that, at times, 8f was ineffective and did not discuss the issues appropriately. Given that, in this study, 8f (a) was the least vocal board member, (b) felt silenced, and (c) was 1 of only 2 women board members who micromanaged, we speculate that women who practice a micromanaging approach to decision making may not be accepted by others at the table. To be sure, 9f, the only other woman micromanager who was considered moderately vocal, also expressed feelings of being silenced. She said,

I talk a lot in the community and to those involved in the problem. If a problem needs fixing, I am going to fix it. However, my agenda item hardly ever ends up on the agenda and when it does, other board member don't think it's important enough to take a vote. Sometimes it's just a 'discussion item.' [Board Member 9f]

Again, this micromanaging woman board member (9f) appeared to feel silenced by her peers. Interestingly, when comparing perceptions of Board Member 9f to a man (28m) with a similar profile—Board Member 28m is a moderately vocal micromanaging man board member—we

found that 28m did not feel silenced at all. In fact, 28m felt he had “a great deal of influence” on the board, and, during triangulation interviews, his colleagues did not believe he was assertive or aggressive during decision making. Finally, when we compared similar cases (one woman with one man) in this matrix, this same pattern repeated again and again. That is, in this small sample, women board members who micromanaged felt and were in reality (identified during triangulation) silenced by their peers and/or superintendent or not taken seriously, while men board members who demonstrated similar traits did not feel silenced by others and were taken much more seriously.

### CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

The purpose of this article was to examine the impact (relative to perceived voice and influence) of gender during school board decision making. In addressing this purpose, the study generated two categories of findings. The first category included findings related to the three behavioral factors we analyzed—vocal space, decision making, and power. The second category included findings related to the relationships between and across the three behavioral factors.

To begin, findings from the individual behavioral factor, vocal space/influence include: (a) almost all board members were found to be moderate to high vocal (only three were moderately low vocal); (b) most men board members were clustered at the high vocal end of the continuum; and (3) most women board members were clustered in the middle or at the moderate vocal location on the continuum and perceived themselves to be less influential than men. Next, findings related to decision making include: (a) 8 board members, (2 women and 6 men) were micromanagers; (b) 12 board members, (7 women and 5 men), were collaborative; and, (c) men, more so than women, tended to micromanage. Commonalities across micromanagers include: (a) frequently communicated with the superintendent; (b) spent significant time in school buildings; (c) issued directives to administrators, faculty, and staff; (d) showed strong interest in daily operations of the district; and (e) had strong interest in issues related to their own children. Commonalities across collaborative decision makers include: (a) promoted common objectives of the organization rather than promoting personal goals; (b) sought broad-based input from constituents; (c) honored diversity in opinions; and (d) intentionally listened carefully and to others.

Findings related to power include: (a) 11 board members (6 women and 5 men) defined power as power with; (b) 9 board members (3 women and 6 men) defined power as power over; (c) 3 women and no

men were placed on the extreme end on the power with side of the Power Continuum; and (e) 3 men and no women were placed on the extreme end of the power over side of the Power Continuum. In summary, women overall tended to be located toward the power with end of the continuum, and men overall tended to be located toward the power over end of the continuum.

Findings from cross-analyzing all three individual behavioral factors include: (a) a strong relationship existed between definitions of power and approaches to decision making—regardless of gender, almost all board members who defined power as power over were micromanagers, and almost all board members who defined power as with others were collaborative; (b) little or no relationship existed between board members' definitions of power and how vocal they were; (c) men were more likely than women to be at the extreme high vocal end of the continuum and were more likely than women to define power as over others; and (4) in brief, men were more likely than women to micromanage, define power as over others, and be extremely high vocal, while women were more likely than men to collaborate, define power as with others, and be moderately high vocal.

These findings echo research that has shown that school board/superintendent decision-making teams most often include more men than women (see Bell & Chase, 1993; Blackmore & Kenway, 1997; Charters & Jovick, 1981; Estler, 1975; Hearn, 1990; Marshall & Kasten, 1994; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Schmuck, 1975; Shakeshaft, 1987; Skrla, 2000; Tallerico, 2000; Walby, 1990) and advance research that reports women have a tendency to be more collaborative in their approach to decision making than men (Aburdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Bell, 1988; Blackmore & Kenway, 1997; Brunner, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Cooper, 1995; Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Grogan, 1996; Hart, 1995; Hurty, 1995; Nogay & Beebe, 1997; Marshall, Patterson, Rogers, & Steele, 1996; Ortiz, 1982; Pitner, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1987).

Going further, our two categories of findings provide evidence and suggest that gender impacts decision-making processes at the highest level of school governance. While the social myth of neutrality between genders still exists (Skrla, 2003) and probably prevents most administrators and board members from recognizing the gendered decision-making dynamics at the board table, this study reveals that gender matters, neutrality does not exist, and experiences of women on boards are different than those of men.

Indeed, the study also produced individual narratives that went beyond the original purpose. Although these narratives cannot be considered findings in the conventional sense, they are evocative and useful for

thinking further about the issue of gender and school board decision making. For example, this study's findings suggested men and women board members' use of voice and influence are not only gendered, but that the expectations of board members are also gendered. That is, board members who enacted gender-specific vocal behaviors carried more influence at the board table than those who did not. In fact, some of the study's narratives suggested that being vocal is an accepted behavior for women on boards, *only if* they avoid micromanagement and behave collaboratively during decision making. Such practices appear to provide a way for women to advance agendas and be influential. At the same time, high vocal men who micromanage others tended to have the greatest influence at the board table. These normative expectations are gender-specific and have a marked impact on whether women play a significant part in school board decision making. As a result of this study, we believe several compelling implications take shape related to gender, power, approaches to decision making, and vocal space/influence at the board table.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's finding that men tend to dominate school board/superintendency decision-making teams creates the likelihood that most decision-making processes at board tables are conducted in a top-down or micromanagement manner. The implication of this approach is that the possibilities for inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes are greatly reduced and leave little opportunity for the presentation of alternate perspectives that fall outside androcentric paradigms. Therefore, women board members' attempts to forward policy initiatives that carry more consideration for traditionally marginalized populations may be blocked before they reach the board agenda. Evidence of this implication is apparent when considering that the majority of items on posted board meeting agendas are related to the operational issues (construction projects, bonds, budgets) rather than agenda items focused on increasing student achievement (Hess, 2002),<sup>5</sup> in particular the achievement of students from racial minorities.

It appears that woman board members' ability to engage in healthy debate and dialogue is often blocked by board colleagues who believe (consciously, sub-, or unconsciously) that the only role for women on a board is to listen and behave collaboratively—and, in this case, *collaboratively* means women board members will forward or support agenda items generated primarily by men board members. We believe additional implications for this phenomenon may increase as school boards and superin-

tendents find themselves with increasingly diverse student populations (Capper, 2003) and become increasingly accountable to state and federal authorities for meeting the needs of *all* students (NCLB, 2002).

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TRAINING PROGRAMS

The implications of this study's findings elucidate board members and superintendents' need for opportunities and forums in which their personally held gendered assumptions about voice, power, and decision making are challenged. While these topics are traditionally not covered in school board and administrative training programs, we believe the findings of this study can be used by board trainers, school board members, superintendents, and professors of educational administration to improve board/superintendent relationships and advance and support collaborative and more inclusive decision-making processes in the future.

Because of the design of their roles and responsibilities and their lack of power or authority as individuals, school board members are forced to make decisions in a group and as a group. Ironically, board members are rarely trained in collaborative decision-making processes or individual versus collective power. Indeed, our experiences with board members reveal that most lack an understanding of and skills in collaborative decision-making processes. Generally, board members believe that, because they *vote* on issues, they have made decisions collaboratively. In fact, voting is not a collaborative decision-making process, but rather a democratic process whereby multiple perspectives may or may not be given discussion space dependent upon how "Robert's Rules of Order" or other meeting protocols, such as who sets the agenda items or who is allowed input into the agenda, are followed. Therefore, board training that articulates and includes collaborative decision-making processes focused on the common goal of increasing student achievement for *all* students is warranted.

Prior to collaborative decision-making training, we believe that a foundational level of training that promotes self-reflection and transformational learning outcomes could substantially improve district climate and, consequently, perhaps, student achievement. These training activities include those that ask superintendents, administrative teams, and board members to reflect on how their conceptions of power can affect the decision-making process and to further consider how to overcome silent or overt forms of bias and oppression at the board table and within the community so that the multiple perspectives of constituents are heard and valued.

We believe it is in the best interest of the students, especially women and other marginalized populations, to be a part of an educational organization that embraces diversity and utilizes collaborative decision-making processes. As educators come to understand their responsibility to create socially just schooling, they need to understand and be able to implement inclusive, collaborative decision-making processes. If school board/superintendency teams can model and advance these processes, perhaps policy related to social justice will have a better chance of being forwarded, acted upon, and implemented across our nation's schools.

To some, our suggestions for drastic reform in school board member training may seem too idealistic. Yet, we know that, over the past decade, many university administrative preparation programs have been successful in transforming their school leader preparation programs from operational and management skills as primary learning objectives to transformational learning objectives (see, for example, Brown 2005; Young, Mountford, & Skrla, 2006) in an effort to produce school administrators who advocate socially just policy and practices. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to believe that similar learning objectives for school board members would result in similar outcomes.

Finally, it seems we are at the tipping point of a national imperative. That is, the 200-year-old struggle over power between school board members and administrators must stop. Instead, we must begin to understand better how school board members, men and women of racial backgrounds from every class, communicate and can be educated to become better communicators and ethical, equitable leaders of local school governance.

### *Notes*

1. The findings from this study are the result of a larger study that examined five factors related to school board member motivation, conceptions of power, and decision-making factors. This paper reports the findings for two of those factors, power and decision making. For the full study, see Mountford (2001).

2. The description of the data sample, collection, and several of the data analysis methods (particularly those related to processes used to place participants on continua) was also published in Mountford (2004, pp. 715–718).

3. Many of the findings on power were previously published in Mountford (2004, pp. 726–730).

4. Figure 4 (the plotted power continuum) was previously published in Mountford (2004, p. 727).

5. This has changed somewhat since the passage of No Child Left Behind (2002) because now districts are federally mandated to report the scores of low SES students and may face sanctions if they do not.

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