Public school secretaries: hearts of gold, voices of reason

Pamela Sue Nystrom

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Educational Administration and Supervision Commons

Recommended Citation

Nystrom, Pamela Sue, "Public school secretaries: hearts of gold, voices of reason " (2002). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 537.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/537

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

UMI
Public school secretaries: Hearts of gold, voices of reason

by

Pamela Sue Nystrom

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education

Program of Study Committee:
Leslie R. Bloom, Major Professor
    Jacquelyn S. Litt
    Carlie C. Tartakov
    Geoffrey Abelson
    David B. Owen

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2002
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation of

Pamela Sue Nystrom

has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University

Signature was redacted for privacy.

Major Professor

Signature was redacted for privacy.

For the Major Program
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, daughter, son, family members, and friends who have had enduring confidence in my ability to complete this endeavor. I also acknowledge all of the wonderful secretaries I have known. These women have contributed so much, to so many, and have been rewarded so sparingly. I salute you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Missing Voice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Dissertation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE JOB OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SECRETARY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Review</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History of Clerical Workers</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Feminization of Office Work</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Considerations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY: SEEING WITH NEW EYES</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on the Research Process</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employing the Research Process</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT THEY DO, WHAT THEY THINK, WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Perceptions</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. COMMON PURPOSES, COMMON ROLES, COMMON PROBLEMS</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Purposes: School Secretaries as Working Mothers</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Roles: Numerous and Ever-changing</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Problems: Issues of Compensation and Support</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice from the Experts</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6. DOES MS. KLEINHOPPER RUN THE SCHOOL?</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Building Principal: An Advocate for Change</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on the Research Process</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. LETTER OF INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C. BOOKMARK</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX D. PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E. HUMAN SUBJECTS INFORMATION 143
APPENDIX F. FIRST TELEPHONE INTERVIEW 152
APPENDIX G. SECOND TELEPHONE INTERVIEW 154
APPENDIX H. FIRST E-MAIL CORRESPONDENCE 156
APPENDIX I. SECOND E-MAIL CORRESPONDENCE 158
REFERENCES 160
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. Strategies Used to Promote Qualitative Research Validity 39
TABLE 2. School District Enrollment Table 55
TABLE 3. Salary Information of the Interviewees 108
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people that I would like to thank and many reasons for thanking them. I will start with my major professor, Dr. Leslie Rebecca Bloom. She truly taught me to see with new eyes. Her dedication to her career is inspirational. My formal education spans more than 30 years. Because of Dr. Bloom and others, the last six years have been the most remarkable. I want to thank the other members of my committee for contributing to my remarkable education.

Dr. Jackie Litt opened the doors to the field of sociology and to the bigger issues related to women. Dr. Carlie Tartakov has been an excellent role model and resource who encouraged me to go back to school many years ago. Dr. Geoff Abelson has supported my generalist endeavors, knowing that my heart belongs to the children with the greatest needs. Dr. David Owen reintroduced me to my roots as an educator and inspired me to think beyond the “shadows in the cave.” He encouraged me to get as much out of this educational experience as possible and to pursue courses in leadership.

A huge thank you goes out to the twelve secretaries who helped me prepare for the research project. Thanks, Pam A., Patty, Sandy, Leslie, Nancy N., Judy, Donna, Nancy P., Lori, Becky, Pam P., and Deb! An even bigger thank you goes out to the eighteen secretaries from the four corners of the state of Iowa who participated in the research project and shared their time, energy, and ideas. I want to single out Beth, Erin, and Fran and thank them for allowing me to visit and for
offering to help me in any way possible. That is the true spirit of the public school secretary!

A special thank you is extended to Pam Anderson, my secretary. Without her, I'd still be transcribing interviews. She has played a crucial role in this project.

I have been blessed with a wonderful family and a great number of good friends. My husband, Marck, has encouraged me to pursue my education throughout our 34 years together. He has been a great cheerleader. My daughter, Emilee and my son, Kristofferson have motivated me to work hard, as they always do, to meet my personal goals. I have been encouraged by so many members of my family, especially my in-laws, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, and my three sisters. They have supported me with their faith, confidence, kind words, and tolerance. I have missed or forgotten events and opportunities and my oversights have been met with understanding and humor. A special thanks to my sister-in-law, Paula Goldsworth, for hours of counseling on road trips to my nieces' sporting events and for sharing her insights about the roles of secretaries. She is one of the great ones.

My good friends and fellow teachers have treated me equally well. They have arranged schedules to meet my needs, changed schedules to meet my needs and listened to my trials and tribulations of graduate school for far too long. I want to thank my fellow sixth grade teachers, Linda, Jerry, Valerie, Shelly, Wendy, and Marcia for being such good neighbors at school. I also thank our counselor, Connie, for listening to me whine and our computer expert, Brenda, for seeing me through computer glitches and MAC meltdowns.
My final thank you goes out to Dr. Mumbi Mwangi, a fellow student, a mentor, and a prayer partner. It has been my privilege to know and work with her. She has taught me so much and helped me so often. I wish the best for her.

Thank you all, I couldn't have done this without you!
ABSTRACT

Social scientists have referred to secretaries as *invisible* and government agencies have described the job classification as *non-regulated*. One segment of this job classification, public school secretary, could very well be described as *nonexistent*. However, anyone who has ever visited a public school in the state of Iowa has probably met the school secretary. She has been described as *the woman in the principal's office* and frequently she has been indirectly, and sometimes directly, assigned to manage the school. Yet, as a group, these public school employees have been ignored by the leaders in educational research and policy study. Fortunately, these women have been *missing* in an abstract sense. If the public school secretary was suddenly eliminated in reality, public school administrators would protest in the streets.

In this study I have reached out to the school secretaries of Iowa and offered them an opportunity to discuss their views regarding their roles in our public schools. I have reported demographic information and the personal perceptions of 147 public school secretaries. These women have represented the smallest and largest school districts in the state. I provided members of this large group with an opportunity to raise their voices. I interviewed and corresponded with eighteen volunteers and of that group, I focused more closely on six women who work in settings that represent a majority of the schools in Iowa. Through their stories and personal narratives, a picture of this woman, the public school secretary, has emerged.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Fran\textsuperscript{1}, the secretary at a rural elementary school, went about her business that Tuesday morning believing it was like any other Tuesday morning. She had greeted the teachers, her little friend, "Mike," and the parents that stopped in the office with forgotten books and messages. When the teaching associate from the classroom across the hall rushed into the office a little after 9:00, she thought it would be another request for a favor or to update her concerning one of the students. The principal was out of town attending a meeting and as building secretary she was basically responsible for the day’s business. Instead, this woman told Fran that her husband had just called with some terrible news and Fran should turn on the TV in the back room. She went to the workroom adjacent to the main office, turned on the TV, and watched the stunning image of a large airliner crashing into the second tower at the World Trade Center. Keenly aware of the seriousness of the situation, Fran knew something had to be done. As she related:

All of the administrators were out on September 11 and I had a lot of decisions to make. There was no administrator at all. I had parents calling and of course, it was my duty to walk around and tell the teachers what was going on. That was one of the harder things I remember ever doing, writing up the memo saying what had happened. And then of course, parents were

\textsuperscript{1} All secretaries interviewed for this document are represented by pseudonyms to protect their identities.
calling wanting to know whether to come get their kids. We even had a
parent call and say they did not want their kids exposed to this, which, they
are fifth and sixth graders and they'd already been watching TV for an hour
and a half. (Interview, January, 2002)

Those of us in the teaching profession realize that public school secretaries
play an important role in the culture of any school, yet their role appears to have
been overlooked by educational researchers. This group has not been singled out
for study, and is essentially missing from the vast body of literature related to public
education, school administration, or school improvement and reform.

Background

Fran's story underscores the importance of the duties school secretaries are
routinely expected to perform. Even though the events of September 11, 2001, were
extraordinary and unpredictable, what was predictable was Fran's ability to take
charge of the situation and keep the teachers informed of the tragic events. She
would also be the person who communicated with concerned parents, relating how
the children were being exposed to the event. Fran's role as a decision-maker far
exceeded the stereotypic role of the typist-copy machine-switchboard operator some
have embraced for the school secretary.

In the spring of 2000 two events prompted my interest in the role of public
school secretaries. The first was an anecdote telling of the outcome of contract
negotiations in an Iowa school district. The chief administrative officer for the school
district had frozen salaries and salary advancements for one group of employees,
the school secretaries. His rationale was based on the fact that an extremely high health insurance increase had absorbed the new monies allocated for the secretary group and salary advancements or increases, coupled with the cost of insurance, would exceed the negotiated percentage increase awarded to all support staff groups. As I listened, I noted a more sobering element of the situation. It seemed that some principals in the district had not advocated on behalf of their secretaries and I wondered why not.

The second milepost was a commentary I discovered while searching for information related to school secretaries. The title of the article, *Does Mrs. Kleinhopper Really Run the School?* caught my attention. I located the on-line article from the April, 1994, edition of *Education Week* and to my surprise, found that the author had written a disparaging piece proposing the notion that school office staff had the audacity to believe they were important to the operation of the school. As this school administrator stated, “Clerical skills are terminal abilities that tend to reach their asymptotic levels sometime during 11-grade vocational classes. There are literally millions of reasonably intelligent people who can learn to operate word processors, run office machinery, and speak pleasantly into telephones” (Barone, 1994). The author chose to write the commentary in response to the annual “Secretary’s Day” tradition, and sadly enough the publication printed it. These two incidents of disrespect for the work done by the secretaries in public schools disgruntled me. I had never viewed these women as being mere typists or telephone jockeys. I knew they were charged with insuring the smooth operation of the office and often the entire school. Mr. Barone’s contemptuous tone seemed to be
grounded in shallow arguments. His attitude also prompted other questions: Why do women want to work as school secretaries? Were all school secretaries women? What keeps them in these jobs when it is possible to earn higher wages in the private domain? What is their role in the operation of the school? What do they believe in and stand for in our schools?

The following statements, written by a school secretary who had also read Mr. Barone's commentary as she completed the routine task of reviewing the new issues of Education Week for her very busy boss, paralleled my reaction. The author, Ann Sawicki, stated:

As a secretary, I find this commentary disturbing. Stephen Barone seems to have a problem recognizing that there are some secretaries considered 'key' people in their buildings. I have not heard a secretary say that she ran the building. Rather, I hear from administrators that they know who holds things together and gets things done.

I do not consider my administrator 'superfluous to the educational enterprise' and I would think that she does not feel that way about me. We work as a team on many projects, but I recognize she is the boss and I am the subordinate.

I do not believe it serves any person in education to belittle anyone who works to advance the education of children. . . . We are all a team, working
together to try to make this a more positive world for our students. (Sawicki, 1994)

Ms. Sawicki touched on key points that I believed needed to be addressed through the research process.

**A Missing Voice**

My initial search of resources was in response to the salary problems of the group of secretaries mentioned before. I used the keywords, *public school secretaries*, to search the EBSCO electronic database of professional journals and publications and found that only four articles were cited. By changing the keywords to, *school secretaries*, the list expanded to 19 sources and that's when I uncovered the commentary by Barone. After reading the opinion of one administrator/education consultant, I discovered that I had many more questions than answers. I continued to search for the body of research that could help me answer them. An ERIC search of three university library collections yielded similar sources, and I found only one research study that specifically focused on elementary school secretaries. I was looking for the voice of this group of public school employees and soon realized that it wasn't going to be easy to find.

The limited information that I did find was generally statistical in nature and was reported by organizations like the National Education Association or by school administrators and their professional associations. I discovered there are a limited number of state organizations, like the Minnesota Association of Secretaries to the Principals (MASP), which were founded to provide links to training, a network for
problem solving and sharing, and to offer encouragement to provide better services to the public (MASP, 2000). However, as I was to find out through the research process, none of the secretaries in my study belonged to any formal organization exclusively for public school secretaries.

I was perplexed by the lack of information available for review. My primary questions were expanding. I was curious to know where the history of school secretaries in public education was buried. I wondered if the void in educational research pertaining to this group of public school employees was real or imagined, and I also wondered what secretaries had to say relative to their roles in public education. Answers to such questions can be explored and theorized through a variety of research practices. It was my conclusion that school secretaries themselves could generate the most powerful and genuine answers. Thus, discovering what these women have to say about their place in public education became the focus of my dissertation research.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

Six chapters represent the content of my study. The previous section of Chapter 1 introduced public school secretaries as a group of public employees who are instrumental to the day-to-day business of schooling, yet it is a group of employees essentially overlooked by the educational research community. An initial investigation of elementary school secretaries by Casanova (1991) only partially approached the topic and essentially identified the need for further study. My own preliminary research was dominated by the impression that so much about this
group was missing. Where was the history of the school secretary? Where was the discussion of the role of the school secretary and the significance of this role in the organizational structure of public schools? Where was the voice of this group of employees? I found that answers to these questions lay buried in the history of America's clerical works, in the history of the role of the public school principal, and in the discernible void in the vast body of literature generated by researchers in the field of public education.

Chapter 2 explores three topics that are integral to the discovery and understanding of the history and role of public school secretaries. The first is the history of clerical workers in the United States. The second is the feminization of the office place, which is a discourse embedded within the history of clerical workers. This history reveals the social contexts that instituted practices leading to the significantly high percentage of women employed as clerical workers. The third topic, which is directly related to the role of the public school secretary, is the history of the role of the public school principal. Exploration of each topic was important in creating a foundation of knowledge establishing school secretaries as a distinctive group within the public school setting.

In Chapter 3 I discuss my methodological research strategies. I divide Chapter 3 into two distinct sections. In the first part of Chapter 3 I discuss qualitative methodological considerations that were reflective of my personal transformation as a researcher. Discussions include the topics of validity, feminist research, ethics, and the politics of research. I incorporate these discussions into Chapter 3 because they support what I had determined to be the best way to express the ideas of my
research respondents and to present the voice of this particular group of women. I purposefully wanted to employ research practices that strive to break down the hierarchy of power that can develop between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bloom, 1998) and create a research atmosphere that fostered trust and equality between the women I interviewed and myself. Adoption of qualitative methodology enabled me to implement such research process and has allowed me to fully investigate the personal perceptions of public school secretaries while preserving each individual's contribution.

The second part of Chapter 3 addresses the procedures I used as a researcher. I review the multiple ways in which I collected data, including: a questionnaire; recorded and transcribed interviews; e-mail correspondence; field notes from on-site observations; and follow-up contacts with some of the respondents. I also discuss the funnel approach I used to analyze themes and narrow the focus of topics generated by the respondents' narratives.

Chapter 4 is a transition between history and research methodology, and interpretations and theoretical analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to create an image of the school secretary and focus on the common characteristics and viewpoints that so many school secretaries share. The descriptive information included in Chapter 4 reflects the responses from 147 questionnaires returned by mail and excerpts from the transcriptions of the first recorded interviews with 18 secretaries who consented to participate in telephone interviews. I approach analysis of this data in stages. First, I analyze demographic data taken from the questionnaires. Then I couple the numerical facts with statements from the secretaries' narratives.
I continue to mesh the perceptions reported in the questionnaire with the actual words of the secretaries in order to support claims and further convey the identity of the school secretary. This level of analysis focuses primarily on why women become school secretaries, why they continue in this role, their perceptions on working relationships and abilities, and the significance of the role they play within the school setting. I also start to narrow the focus of my analysis to particular themes which were addressed in the second interview.

In Chapter 5 I continue to use information from the written personal perceptions of the questionnaire participants, responses from the second round of interviews with the 18 interview respondents, e-mail correspondence, on-site observation data, and input from a small focus group selected from the interviewees. The various sources of data reveal three main themes: 1) school secretaries as working mothers; 2) the frequent changes in roles and levels of responsibility secretaries face in the public school setting; and 3) issues of equity and compensation. These themes were common to all groups of data providers, especially the women participating in the interviews, and generated the most interest, tension and concern for the respondents. Current research and theories were used to support knowledge claims and substantiate the trends that were ultimately my research conclusions.

Chapter 6 proposes possibilities of what could be and includes reflections of what the research process has meant to the participants and to myself. I again utilize the input of the small group of secretaries whose insights were invaluable to me as I prepared the recommendations of this research. I chose these women for several
reasons, but primarily because they helped me achieve the major goal of this research project, to elicit the voice of school secretaries. As a group they have invested over 125 years of service in their schools and have worked with all age levels of students. All are working in school districts with enrollments between 300 and 1000 students, and they represent 58 percent of the schools in Iowa (Iowa Department of Education, 2000), as well as 58 percent of the public school secretaries. Their willingness to continue in the research process was impressive to me because they viewed this study as a way to make a difference for others. The recommendations I propose in Chapter 6 are research products created by a research team consisting of the secretaries and myself. It was our goal to inform administrators, other educators, and the general public of the significant role school secretaries play in making public schools a better place for children. I conclude Chapter 6 with personal perspectives relative to the research process. I include these comments as a way to share with and inform other researchers of the impact the research process has on respondents.

**Significance of the Study**

Marshall and Rossman (1995) presented three challenges to qualitative researchers preparing to engage in qualitative research endeavors. These challenges were stated as: “should do-ability;” “do-ability;” and “want-to-do-ability” (p. 6). I view these three challenges as a format for discussing the significance of a completed study.
The first challenge pertains to the construction of a compelling argument that supports the need to do the proposed research. The second challenge addresses the feasibility of such research. It focuses on the strategies that can be used to facilitate the research, acknowledges the review of ethical considerations pertinent to research, and encourages methodological considerations deemed significant by the researcher. The third challenge, described as difficult because researchers expressing a keen interest in a certain project may be criticized for being biased and subjectivist, is related to the researchers engagement in the topic.

This research study successfully meets the three challenges presented by Marshall and Rossman. One study of elementary school secretaries completed by Casanova more than ten years ago is not a body of research. The invisibility of the public school secretary is evident when searching through volumes of literature on public schools and school administrators reveals only lists of duties and little more. As the educational practices in our public schools are more closely scrutinized by politicians and concerned citizens, it is probable that educational leaders will become even more dependent on support from within their school organizations. Secretaries, as a group, are already providing this type of support, even though it is unclear what their role is in the organizational structure of public schools. When considering these factors, the challenge of "should-do-ability" is surmounted.

The "do-ability" challenge is met through the utilization of qualitative methodology. Expanding the ideals of qualitative research even further, to follow the ideals of feminist qualitative methodology, I was able to enter the research process ready to investigate questions, while being keenly aware of the relationship between
myself and the secretaries who are volunteers in the pursuit of answers to research questions. As a result of my choice to employ qualitative methodology, data collection takes numerous forms including personal interview, narratives, e-mail correspondence, small group analytical feedback and observational notes. Although using a survey is instrumental in collecting data that focuses on demographic information and global perception that support discussion topics, the primary purpose of the survey was to find public school secretaries willing to share their stories. Unencumbered by the necessity to control variables and insure replication of results, the qualitative research paradigm provides a more inclusive, diverse methodology than the quantitative paradigm and is my method of choice. This research process enables the participating school secretaries to express their perceptions and to inform the researcher. In turn, analysis of themes and topics produces knowledge that can lead to transformation within the educational, societal and political contexts effecting the jobs of these important public school employees. The research process becomes a vehicle for change. It affords public school secretaries the latitude to candidly discuss personal perceptions relevant to their roles in public education. The research process enables the group to find their missing voice and express themselves.

As a veteran teacher working in the public school setting, interest in the welfare of this group of public school employees and first-hand knowledge of the many contributions they make in our public schools prepared me to enter into this project with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose. The desire to secure an audience willing to listen to the voices of public school secretaries has been the impetus that
propelled me forward in the research process from the start. My willingness to work for change has been guided by the precepts of critical theory and activist research paradigms. Fine (1992) described activist research projects as those which “seek to unearth, interrupt, and open new frames for intellectual and political theory and change. Researchers critique what seems natural, and spin images of what’s possible, and engage in questions of how to move from here to there” (p. 220). Wolf (1992) discussed how the research agenda is as simple as adding to the descriptive material on women’s experiences, or as politically charged as devising ways to dismantle hierarchies of domination. Thus, the need to explore the personae of the school secretary and to clarify the significant role she plays in the successful management of a school support how I faced the challenge of “want-to-do-ability”, which I have come to realize was really no challenge at all.
CHAPTER 2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE JOB
OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SECRETARY

Kate has been a public school secretary for the past 35 years. As I listened to her relate her personal employment history, I was struck by a number of similarities between her experiences and the early history of female clerical workers in the United States. Even though 100 years had passed, she could have been the poster child for the office workers of the late 1800s. Here are portions of the conversation:

Pam: Why did you want a job as a school secretary?
Kate: Well, that was the one that was available, I guess, when I decided to get a job.

Pam: Okay. And you have here that you've been in your current employment situation for 35 years. So, was this your first job?
Kate: No, I had done interviews for Iowa State University. And when my husband was in college I worked at Iowa State University as a secretary, but basically, I had stayed home and raised my three girls until they were all in school.

Pam: You've talked a little bit about other jobs. Did you prefer those over this?
Kate: The interviewing I didn't like....The one at Iowa State University was okay. It was mainly like a typing pool and I was secretary for a professor with terrible handwriting (she laughs).
Pam: What was your starting pay?
Kate: I think I got 75 cents an hour in 1949 at Iowa State. (Interview, December, 2001)

In 1966 Kate started working as a secretary again. Her starting salary at the local public school was two dollars per hour. Thirty-five years later, Kate is earning eleven dollars per hour. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the mean hourly wage for secretaries in the nation is $11.98 with a mean annual wage of $24,910. In Iowa wages are somewhat lower. The mean is $11.31 per hour and $23,520 annually (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002). Kate's annual salary is less because like many school secretaries, she is not allowed to work the entire calendar year. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also calculates inflation using as its base the purchasing power of the dollar in 1913. Kate's initial hourly salary was below the 1965 index of $3.18 and her 2001/02 salary is well below the 2001 index of $17.95 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). As history will show, hiring female office workers became one of the most cost effective business practices employers have found.

Initial Review

As stated before, preliminary investigation of the role of the public school secretary suggested that little consideration had been given to this role as it was essentially missing from the vast quantities of literature focused on public education. Although various classes of support staff and non-certified personnel were stated to be important in the current literature on school improvement, information about school secretaries was limited to lists of duties and expectations. As I reviewed the
content of numerous courses in curriculum and educational leadership, I realized that this group of women, and almost all school secretaries are women (Casanova, 1991), has never been the exclusive focus of extensive study.

I did locate two organizations that have supported the role of public school secretaries for almost 70 years. The National Education Association (NEA) was the first. By reviewing past issues of the NEA publication, Today, I noted that the organization periodically features short articles on individuals and groups of secretaries working toward better services for students and better working conditions, training, and compensation for themselves. "Nothing Left Undone," (NEA, 1999) an article featuring an interview with a school secretary from Shreveport, LA is a good example of how the publication supports school secretaries. The main theme of the piece centers on the secretary's initiative to expand her computer skills which benefit the entire high school where she works.

But often the role of the school secretary is incorporated into a larger body of school employees, that of educational support personnel, and in depth analysis of the role of the school secretary becomes secondary to wage and equity issues for all non-certified support staff (NEA, April, 2000). The most significant NEA endeavor associated with the role of school secretaries was the organization's sponsorship of the National Association of Educational Office Professionals (NAEOP) in the 1930s. As the organizational structure of public schools changed and principals assumed the total management of schools, office clerks/secretaries became necessary extensions of this management system. Leaders in the NEA provided school
administrators with information defining the duties of the principal and the school secretary.

The organization openly acknowledged the importance of the secretary's role in public education and this history is reported on the NAEOP's Internet home page. In 1934 the NEA asked the superintendents of schools in 157 cities to select secretaries from their districts to act as representatives at an organizational meeting. The group would be responsible for founding an NEA affiliate organization for school secretaries. By the end of 1934 the National Association of School Secretaries was formed. The charter group of 96 secretaries later renamed the group the National Association of Education Secretaries, and the group has evolved into the current NAEOP or National Association of Educational Office Professionals (NAEOP, 2001).

The mission of the organization has continued to promote the following goals for nearly 70 years:

The mission of the (NAEOP), the only national professional association for educational office personnel, is to provide professional growth opportunities, leadership, and service for employees in education through a specifically-designed certification program, quality training, a network for sharing information and ideas, recognition of achievements, and fellowship (NAEOP, 2001).

The organization, currently based in Wichita, Kansas, represents school secretaries in six disciplines: elementary, middle school/junior high, secondary/high school, higher education, State Departments of Education, and retired secretaries from all
groups. It should be noted that only one of the secretaries interviewed in this study had heard of the organization.

The most comprehensive analysis of the role of elementary school secretaries available for review was completed by Casanova (1991). However, her study was not exclusively centered on the perceptions of the six elementary school secretaries featured in the study. Rather, a prominent element of the research pertained to the perceptions of the six principals the secretaries worked with. Casanova reported on the inter-dependence between the school principal and the school secretary and differentiated how male and female principals characterized this inter-dependence.

Casanova discussed how issues of gender were significant factors in how secretaries were depicted by their supervisors. The four male principals discussed the theme of “personal support” (p. 101), while the two female principals described secretarial support in relation to actual work tasks. She related that the male principals used marriage and mothering metaphors to describe the secretary’s job. One male principal offered this advice to school secretaries: “You’re gonna marry your boss...you’re gonna create a marital relationship...become one in philosophy...become one in strategies...always be understanding and forgiving...Give support to the principal even when he’s wrong” (p. 102). However, secretaries and female principals used a far less personal terminology to describe working relationships and included terms like “trust, confidence and teamwork” (p. 105) to describe mutually supportive roles. The six principals agreed on several common themes related to the roles their secretaries play. These included:
providing continuity in the daily operation of the school; projecting the school's image; and facilitating communication within and outside of the school.

Perhaps the most noteworthy element of Casanova's inquiry into the role of the school secretary was how little of the information used in the study centered on the perceptions of the secretaries. She received 291 completed surveys of the 724 mailed (Casanova, 1991, p. 150) to secretaries throughout the United States and completed six interviews with secretaries in their school settings. However, focus repeatedly shifted to issues related to the school principals and only a few of the secretaries' personal perceptions were included in the writing. Casanova did call for further investigation of this topic and she indicated that the role of secretaries was closely connected to the topics of women's work, clerical work, and school organization (p. 15). As I expanded my investigation I noted that the historical and representational issues relating to the role of the school secretary were deeply embedded within these topics.

The History of Clerical Workers

The history of clerical workers in America has been well documented. Comprehensive and critical studies have agreed that the origination of the role, *secretary*, has its roots in the "white-collar" (Crozier, 1965) revolution in Western countries. During the civil War federal government officials were plagued by the labor shortage caused by the war and the first female clerks were hired in Washington, D.C. under "experimental conditions" (Davies, 1982, p. 51). The initial role of the female clerks was limited to the completion of rudimentary tasks like
sorting and packaging currency for the U.S. Treasury. The experiment was determined to be a success and by 1869 women were being recruited as stenographers, bookkeepers and typists as well. Salary was the most notable factor for hiring women and as employers discovered that they could save money by paying women lower wages than their male counterparts, more employers justified the practice. It made good business sense to hire a woman who was willing to accept a yearly wage of $500 for doing the same job a man had been doing for $1800 per year (p. 52). Although this pay differential could be considered alarming, Davies reported that the main reason girls aspired to become clerical workers was because those jobs offered better pay than other jobs available to women.

DeVault (1990) and Davies (1982) reported wage scales from the 1880s that denoted a significant difference between the salaries of skilled clerical workers, many of whom were women, and other skilled workers who were, without exception, men. Machinists of the time earned $12.25 weekly and plumbers earned as much as $18.53 (DeVault, p. 66). Weekly wages for skilled office workers were much lower and included: bookkeepers who earned $6.55; cashiers who were paid as much as $7.43; copyists (workers who copied correspondence by hand) who reported earned $6.78 weekly; and clerks who were paid as little as $5.28 per week (Davies, p. 64). By the 1890s wages had improved and clerks were making $6.92 weekly; stenographers and typists, who had replaced copyists, were earning $9.55 weekly; and bookkeepers were making as much as $9.08 weekly. These salaries continued to be stronger than those earned by women who worked in sales where they made $6.00 weekly or in the needle trades. Milliners earned as much as $7.24
weekly, while seamstresses made $5.50 and factory girls made as little as $4.84 per week (DeVault, p. 56). There were other factors that compelled employers and employees to view office work as suitable for young women and such factors led to the feminization of the business office.

The Feminization of Office Work

In the late 1800s there was such a great demand for office workers that there were many jobs available for both men and women. Prior to the Civil War business offices had been filled with male clerks and bookkeepers. Male office workers were viewed as long-term employees and they often planned to work for advancement and increased wages within the office hierarchy. Permanent employment of young women was not a common consideration because employers expected these employees to marry and leave. This marriage factor freed management from the necessity of planning for future higher wages for female employees. DeVault (1990) indicated that this societally imposed reality of the workplace made a strong case for the suitability of office work for women. Managers were encouraged to hire young women because when the girls married, openings could be easily filled by other young women with comparable skills and similar plans for the future. As DeVault pointed out, “The difference between a $15-a-week male bookkeeper and an $8-a-week female clerk provided a powerful incentive for businessmen to hire women whenever possible” (p. 19).

Wages, a key element in bringing women into the world of office work, have always been marked by a duality that has been facilitating and limiting at the same
time. The cycle of hiring lower-paid female employees who leave and can be replaced by other lower-paid female employees was firmly established by the late 1890s for white-collar workers and was an element that has perpetuated the earnings gap between men and women that still exists. Goldin (1990) reported that at the turn of the century women ranked at the inexperience or on-set level earned only 66% of what men were paid, but if women continued to their tenth year of employment this percentage rose to 92% (p. 102). Historically, few women were reported to continue their employment for that many years.

Accessible training became a primary influence in choosing office employment following the introduction of office education courses at the high school level. Fine (1990) reviewed the public education curriculum used by the Chicago school system searching for courses that would prepare students for clerical work. She found that, "As early as 1877, the public school's evening school program included both bookkeeping and stenography....By 1892, the evening school program consisted of four courses: mechanical drawing, bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing, with typing compulsory for those studying shorthand" (p. 120). DeVault (1990) completed a similar investigation of the curriculum used by the Pittsburgh public high school's commercial education department during the late 1800s and found that the courses offered included bookkeeping, typewriting and stenography (p. 7). By the turn of the century public high schools throughout America offered courses in office education which prepared students to use new office machines and techniques (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). The invention of the typewriter was cited by several authors (Goldberg, 1983; Lowe, 1987; Fine, 1990; Goldin, 1990; Baxandall &
Gordon, 1995) as a contingent factor that defined the tasks of female office workers. Lowe (1987) stated, "The introduction of the typewriter was crucial to this changing sex ratio in offices, as was the plethora of menial clerical tasks which had sprung up" (p. 19). Use of the typewriter was soon a common curriculum component in most office education programs.

Another influence that has contributed to the feminization of office work is grounded almost entirely in the context of gender. DeVault (1991) analyzed why males and females of the 1890s worked. The social context for males included the discourse of young men as future wage earners. Society had assigned them with the task of securing steady employment that would pay a high enough wage to enable the young man to provide for himself and a family one day. Young women were advised to learn "the mysteries of the kitchen, the dining-room and the parlor. No mention was made of wage earning" (p. 191). The history of male wage earners did not begin with the question of why men work; why one worked was a question almost exclusively reserved for women. As the demand for more workers grew, young women were encouraged to engage in types of employment that would "not ruin them for future work" (p. 195). This future work was marriage. Young women were more concerned about propriety of the various jobs available to them rather than long-term advancement. White, middle-class women often worked to help support their families while they waited to marry. Black women were essentially not recruited to do office work and were not represented in the clerical workers' history until after 1930. In that year only .6% of the clerical workers documented were black
women. However, by 1970 black women comprised 20.5% of the clerical work force (Goldin, 1990).

Baron (1991) pointed out that in the 1890s clerical work was categorized as *non-manual* and some males entering the work force at that time were concerned that their masculinity would be questioned even though the promise of relatively high wages and long-term employment were appealing. Prior to the Civil War this had not been an issue for male office workers. The question of masculinity forced many men to look elsewhere for employment and influenced the engendering of clerical work as “women’s work” (p. 43). As office work became more stratified into male/female functions, certain responsibilities were assigned to women. Davies (1982) examined the categorical changes in office roles. She reported that in 1870 there were almost 29,000 male office clerks and about 900 female clerks, but by 1930 there were roughly 2 million male clerks and 700,000 female clerks. Statistical differences related to female and male stenographers/typists were even greater. In 1870 there were only 147 male and 7 female stenographers/typists listed in the occupations statistics available for analysis; however, by 1930 there were 36,000 males and 755,000 females in this category (Davies, 1982). Reskin & Padavic (1994) related that by 1930 two-thirds of office accountants and bookkeepers were male, while 95% of all typists and stenographers were female. Goldberg (1983) discussed the loss of prestige male office workers experienced at the turn of the century when the demands of business required a reorganization of the office setting. She reported, “Work that had once been performed through close contact between the clerk and the employer was now carried out by large numbers of
bureaucratically organized and controlled workers who were increasingly female" (p. 12). As a result of large numbers of workers doing repetitive paperwork tasks, management roles were assigned to males who were long-term employees. Men who were not appointed as managerial clerks and who were concerned with the feminization of the workplace left to seek other employment.

Feminization of the office has continued steadily. According to a 1992 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4.2 million secretaries were employed in the United States in that year and 98 percent of them were women (Waldrop, 1994). The trend has been maintained in public schools as well. Casanova mentioned the high percentage of women secretaries in her work and my survey results also supported this. Of the 147 surveys I received from school secretaries across Iowa, 146 or 99.31 percent were from women.

Organizational Considerations

In Colwill’s (1987) review of the roles men and women play in organizations, she specifically addressed the secretary’s position and called for further research. She stated:

Secretaries, who have labored invisibly for decades, will soon be discovered by researchers who will recognize the gold mine of research opportunities in the secretarial position: attitudes toward secretaries; the effects of secretaries’ behavior on themselves, their bosses, and their organizational units; the ideal traits of a good secretary (p. 112).
For Colwill, the researchers who have chronicled the history of clerical workers have not explored the role extensively enough. This seemed particularly true for school secretaries, as there is no separate category for them within the topic, clerical workers. It became clear to me that available information on school secretaries was almost exclusively within the context of private enterprise and this reinforced the premise that the group had been essentially overlooked by educational researchers.

I was not surprised to find out that the tasks assigned to public school secretaries paralleled those of secretaries in the private business sector. Nichols (1934) wrote the text, The Personal Secretary, for the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This generic text was used by the University to differentiate college level course work from the less academic course requirements of the business school. More significantly, Nichols made references to secretaries in educational settings and made an effort to acknowledge them as a unique group. In her search for early history pertinent to school secretaries, Casanova (1991) identified an early publication, the Bulletin, which was distributed to members of the National Association of School Secretaries, the charter organization of the NAEOP, as a primary source of information addressing the role of the school secretary within the structure of the public school setting (p. 5). These early documents revealed how the initial purpose of the school clerk secertary was to allow the principal freedom from cumbersome tasks which interfered with the supervision of the teachers and students. Casanova also discovered a list of expectations for school secretaries compiled in 1928 by the National Education Association. This list included a wide variety of duties that can easily be described as clerical in nature. Clerical-type
duties included: making and filing records; filling out requisitions; and compiling school reports. Other duties dealt with organizing the office and included: maintaining the supply room and answering the telephone. A third type of duty was managerial in nature and was directly linked to the principal's role. These duties included: dealing with pupil cases, screening callers, contacting parents, setting appointments for the principal, reminding the principal of scheduled activities, and managing the office in the absence of the principal (p. 10). At this point in her examination of the role of the school secretary, Casanova focused on the duality of these expectations.

She noted that many routine tasks required the secretary to act in a passive, subservient role, while others required a high level of decision making and were authoritative in nature. This fluctuating level of authority was caused by the absence of the principal which created the need for the secretary to assume some of the principal's duties. The ability to stand in for the principal appeared to be a key element of expertise required of school secretaries. This element was associated with the function of the secretary within the context of the school as an organization. Casanova stated:

In the school setting the secretary 'is' the school for many parents and visitors. If the school is to build a common identity, the secretary's help must be sought, for it is the secretary who is most likely to communicate that identity to the public... Principals and secretaries who perceive the school office as just another office in the business model are likely to emphasize the strictly secretarial functions of the job. Those who aim to build a common
identity are likely to emphasize the secretary’s role in the human interactions that are central to the school (p. 123).

This non-clerical skill appeared to be another facet of the secretary’s role that required further analysis. Casanova provided me with an investigative stance, that the member of the school organization with the most impact on the role of the school secretary is the principal.

The role of the American principal evolved congruently with the expansion of public education. An organized legislative campaign to provide free public education can be traced back to the 1760s (Alexander and Alexander, 1998). In 1786 Thomas Jefferson expressed his support of a bill promoting general education by writing, “I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people” (p. 24). As state constitutions insured access to an education for the citizens of the state, legislative control became necessary in order to bring some measure of uniformity to public schooling. Colonists established the earliest public schools. The primary purpose of the colonial school was to socialize children according to the fundamental family beliefs of the community (Haynes & Chalker, 1997, p. 15). As pioneers moved westward, groups or neighbors continued to establish and govern on-room schools in order to provide their children with a rudimentary education. However, these small schools governed by a group of neighbors had vastly different needs than the schools in larger towns and cities and the structure of public education was changing.

By 1820 one-room “common schools” for elementary-aged children were multiplying and by 1840 “grade schools” using grade-level material for instruction
were well established in both rural and urban areas (Haynes & Chalker, 1997, p. 19).

Because many of the common schools were crowded and poorly equipped, new, multi-classroom schools were being built. Larger schools presented new challenges and educators began to modify the organizational structure of schools. As the duties of the teachers multiplied along with the number of students, certain teachers were assigned and compensated for additional administrative responsibilities related to building maintenance and record keeping. These management duties also multiplied and eventually teacher-principals were freed of their teaching duties and allowed to "supervise teachers and provide for all aspects of the school" (Casanova, 1991, p. 3). Early statistics related to public schooling indicated that by the early 1930s 70% of American cities with populations over 100,000 assigned no teaching tasks to principals and 43% of the principals nation-wide no longer taught (Goodykoonts & Lane, 1938). Although infrequently mentioned in the literature pertaining to the public school principal, the role of school clerk or secretary had also been established.

A review of selected texts on public school administration addressed innumerable qualities, skills, and duties of the competent administrator. In a 1963 position statement form the American Association of School Administrators entitled, *Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships of the School Board, Superintendent, and Staff*, I was hoping to find secretaries included in the discussion on relationships with staff. However, the term, staff, was reserved for teachers. I hoped to find secretaries expressly referenced in texts discussing school culture, but found only references to parents, teachers, principals and students (Deal & Peterson, 1999;
Hoyle, English & Steffy, 1998; Arcaro, 1995). Numerous volumes on the topic of quality education and school transformation addressed team building, steering committees and focus groups comprised of members from all disciplines of the school and community (Bonstingl, 1996; Conley, 1996; Duffy, 1996; Arcaro, 1995), but the inclusion of the school secretary was only noticed on a flow chart. A search of the archives of the weekly publication, Education Week, uncovered six publication dates highlighting the keywords, school secretary. None of the articles pertained to the role of the school secretary. However, Cook's (1994) essay, Whose Story Gets Told? posed some critical questions about educational researchers and the products of their studies. As a teacher, she questioned the intent of researchers and how accurately they represented the schools they visited, recommending the need to interview staff like the school secretary to get a complete picture of day-to-day business in a school. Cook stated, “Reform in the 90s is about how power is exercised and by whom” (p. 4). Her basic contention was that researchers want to review school organizations, but they don't want to check with all those involved in the organization.

Bird (1995) touched on the topic of public school secretaries in his dissertation research that focused on the development of a performance evaluation system for educational secretaries. Although he referred to some of his research methods as qualitative, primarily because he completed on-site observations and talked to public school staff members on an individual basis, the focus of the study was job skills and tasks universal to school secretaries. The product of the study included lists of tasks and observable skills that could be evaluated by the school
principal. Bird refrained from including any interview narratives in his work and I was not able to discern the personal perceptions of the secretaries. He created a tool that would facilitate a thorough analysis of the types of jobs performed by the secretary and the amount of time spent on these tasks. He related the importance of the role of the school secretary and stated that, "many researchers have commented on the value of the educational secretary to the school institution" (p. 36). However, Bird related this value primarily to the clerical tasks included in the job. I explored some of Bird's resources and with the exception of Casanova and references to the dissertation work completed in the 1980s by three other researchers, the focus of educational research has been task-oriented and related to the tasks performed for the benefit of the principal.

More current writing by feminist authors has addressed issues of power in relation to work that is predominantly done by women. Acker (1998) has argued that organizational structure is not gender neutral, and proposed that gender issues underline the construction of organizations and warrant closer investigation. She reviewed studies on organizational structures and gender, and defined gendered organizations, stating, "To say that any organization....is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitations and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (p. 305). Acker called for a systematic theory of gender and organizations for a number of reasons. Reasons that impact most markedly on secretaries were: gender segregation of work which is created by organizational practices; income and status inequalities; and identification of
organizations as cultural arenas in which images of gender are produced and reproduced (p. 300). Martin and Collinson (1999) also suggested the need to reassess organizational practices and theories in an effort to address issues related to power structures in the workplace. Martin specifically recommended, "promoting community and cooperation empowering subordinates, and nurturing and caring for associates" (p. 301). If educational researchers attempted to analyze all facets of public school organizations more thoroughly, perhaps educational leaders would be better prepared to resolve or at least confront the challenges they have created for school secretaries.

Knowing that the multi-faceted role of the public school secretary has been marginalized historically and continues to be marginalized in contemporary times, I entered this research endeavor with the intent of building on the foundation established by Casanova’s inquiry. I believed that the educational research community should recognize how all employees working in public schools influence the education of students. The contributions made by the public school secretaries surveyed and interviewed in this study should enable leaders in public education to acknowledge the significance of the secretary’s role and to understand how this role is so much more than the combination of clerical tasks and a pleasant voice on the telephone.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY: SEEING WITH NEW EYES

"The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."

Marcel Proust

Some readers might describe my choice of methods as eclectic, as I used a survey instrument to collect demographic information and initial perceptions from a large group of research participants. However, I readily acknowledge that the survey served two more significant purposes: 1) to secure volunteers for in-depth interviews which would allow me to extensively utilize qualitative research methods; and 2) to demonstrate the rigor of this study to fellow educators by sampling a large number of school secretaries from a variety of public school settings. Because of the blending of what is considered qualitative and quantitative methodology, I present this chapter in two distinct parts. In the first section I discuss the reasons for my methodological choices and in the second section I describe how I implement my choices. I also reflect on how I shifted my epistemological stance from that of an educational researcher grounded in mainstream, quantitative methodology to an educational researcher guided by the ethical standards of feminist qualitative methodology. As Schwandt (1989) stated, "We conduct inquiry via a particular paradigm because it embodies assumptions about the world that we believe and values that we hold and because we hold those assumptions and values we conduct inquiry according to the precepts of that paradigm" (p. 399). As a researcher, I have grown to value what the other person has to say and I have come to realize that if I explore only what I find important, then the voices telling the story will not readily be heard.
Erin: In the 20 years that I have been employed in this school system, I have never been asked to fill out a secretary survey. It's wonderful that someone wants to hear from us. (Interview, January, 2002).

Mona: Thank you for being interested in secretaries. They are definitely not given the recognition for all they do. (Interview, December, 2001).

Anonymous: Thanks. No one's ever asked before. (Questionnaire, October, 2001).

How would I start looking for something as intangible as the voice of an overlooked group of people? How would such a search begin? I know that when I look for tangible objects I am a systematic searcher and use certain strategies. I retrace my steps, analyze recent activities, check my favorite storage places, and ask others for help. I employ memory and visualization tricks. I am persistent, I repeat strategies if I need to, and I am usually successful. I believe my initial inquiry into the topic of public school secretaries was similar. However, this time looking all the old familiar places, books and journals on public education, did not work. The information I sought was truly missing. I would need to go directly to the source, the secretaries themselves.

To disclose the missing voice of a group of people was a serious undertaking. I was certain that I could not and did not want to represent the researched group alone. For some time I have believed that an essential component of the research process is the active involvement of members of the group being studied. Members of the Personal Narratives Group (1989) pointedly asked, “Whose story is to be told? Whose voice is to be heard?” in relation to questions of authorship and the
production of research text. Guided by such questions, I entered this research project ready to examine the role and access the voice of public school secretaries. Versed in multiple research techniques, I chose qualitative research methodology as my primary mode of inquiry. I knew that this research paradigm represented my values as a researcher and would allow me to work hand-in-hand with the group of women I wanted to investigate.

Reflecting on the Research Process

There was a time when I believed that to uncover the voice of a group meant that I would have sole responsibility for the completion of the task. Research tools would have included hundreds of surveys or rating scales consisting of items that reflected my notion of what it was like to be a member of the group. Claims would have been supported by numbers and would have been statistically analyzed and reported as my findings. The findings would become the voice or identity of the group and this representation would have been established through numbers and could be reaffirmed by future researchers. The doctrine of sound quantitative research would have insured that I had followed normalized research procedures. As Harding (1991) stated, “Thus ‘real science’ is restricted to those processes controllable by methodological rules. The methods of answering science….are restricted to procedures for the testing of already formulated hypotheses” (p. 144). Members of the educational field who singularly value the paradigm of quantitative inquiry would have acknowledged my research and I could have considered myself
an accomplished researcher. However, I have changed. The Proust quotation summarized my paradigm shift clearly. I was seeing with new eyes.

The sound research practices I have utilized in this study were comprehensive and rigorous. The ensuing discussion of qualitative research considerations was included to reassure fellow educators of the suitability and validity of the qualitative research paradigm.

**Valid Research Choices**

Many of the methods and techniques for engaging in qualitative research are those of anthropologists and ethnographers whose histories can be traced back to the late 1800s and early 1900s (Thomas, 1993). However, the postmodern qualitative researcher is vastly different from the traditional ethnographer. Current qualitative research is not simply a record or description of what was seen, heard or recorded. It is a blending of theoretical constructs set in a framework of particular methods that often challenge the status quo by investigating the lives of people who are not of any privileged group. DeVault (1999) proposed that empirical studies using qualitative methodology should be acceptable to social scientists, as they utilize aspects of "good science" (p. 231) even though the intent is not solely fact-finding, but possibly liberatory in nature. The ongoing argument between advocates of hard science and qualitative inquiry has demonstrated that qualitative methodology is dependent on a group of techniques not rigidly standardized, but similar from study to study. Punch (1994) stated this idea well: "Qualitative research covers a spectrum of techniques—but central are observation interviewing, and documentary analysis—and these may be used in a broad range of disciplines"
Lather (1986) ties activism to qualitative research by describing the method as *empirical research* that acknowledges and discusses researcher-driven bias and integrates the bias into the advancement of emancipatory theory and the empowerment of the researched.

Lather (1986) also addressed the validity of ideological research, suggesting that validity should be reconceptualized for two main reasons. Foremost, interest-free knowledge was logically impossible to attain regardless of how positivist science continued to reinforce the need for objectivity and neutrality. Additionally, the research community that challenged standardized methods of scientific research design had done so, as Lather professed, "to formulate approaches to empirical research which advance emancipatory theory-building through the development of interactive and action-inspired research designs" (p.64). Lather proposed using triangulation, construct validity, and face validity to substantiate credibility. She has also championed the concept of what she calls catalytic validity, which is found in feminist, neo-Marxist and Freirian empowerment research. The intent of catalytic validity is to measure actual change for the participants engaged in the research process; that is, research should be a catalyst for social change. What Lather had worked to achieve was strong legitimacy for the research claims that qualitative research produces. Her recommendations to researchers include: the use of triangulation in relation to method, data sources, and theories; the practice of reflexive subjectivity; to document how the researcher's assumptions have been affected by the logic of the data; the demonstration of face validity through
reexamination of initial data, knowledge claims based on emerging data, and conclusions drawn by the researcher with a sub sample of research participants; and checking for the presence of catalytic validity, by documenting how the research process has led to insight and, ideally, activism on the part of the respondents (p. 78).

The opportunity for research respondents to experience change was also addressed by Altheide and Johnson (1994) in their discussion of the concept of interpretive validity. They proposed that the goal of some research was not to discover knowledge, but was to liberate, emancipate or create some sort of change related to the interpretation of the data collected. They stated:

From another point of view, the one we suggest, a narrower conception of validity is tied more to the researcher/design/academic audience(s). This narrower conception would view validity in relation to culture, ideology, gender, language, advocacy or empowerment and some traditional scientific standards and would be sensitive to human and cultural contexts. (p. 488)

Other researchers outside the fields of sociology and anthropology were also working to confirm the value of using qualitative research methods, and this included the field of education. Johnson (1997) reviewed the most commonly used strategies and recommended their use to validate knowledge claims. Table 1 represents Johnson’s analysis of research strategies and I utilized this list as one of the tools to monitor my own research activities.
Table I. Strategies Used to Promote Qualitative Research Validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher as “Detective”</td>
<td>A metaphor characterizing the qualitative researcher as he or she searches for evidence about causes and effects. The researcher develops an understanding of the data through careful consideration of potential causes and effects and by systematically eliminating “rival” explanations or hypotheses until the final “case” is made “beyond a reasonable doubt.” The “detective” can utilize any of the strategies listed here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended fieldwork</td>
<td>When possible, qualitative researchers should collect data in the field over an extended period of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low inference descriptors</td>
<td>The use of descriptions phrased very close to the participants’ accounts and researchers’ field notes. Verbatims (i.e., direct quotations) are a commonly used type of low inference descriptors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>“Cross-checking” information and conclusions through the use of multiple procedures of sources. When the different procedures or sources are in agreement you have “corroboration.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data triangulation</td>
<td>The use of multiple data sources to help understand a phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods triangulation</td>
<td>The use of multiple research methods to study a phenomenon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator triangulation</td>
<td>The use of multiple investigators in collecting and interpreting the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory triangulation</td>
<td>The use of multiple theories and perspectives to help interpret and explain the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Descriptor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant feedback</td>
<td>The feedback and discussion of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions with the actual participants and other members of the participant community for verification and insight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
<td>Discussion of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions with other people. This includes discussion with a “disinterested peer” (e.g., with another researcher not directly involved). This peer should be skeptical and play the “devil’s advocate,” challenging the researcher to provide solid evidence for any interpretations or conclusions. Discussion with peers who are familiar with the research can also help provide useful challenges and insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative case sampling</td>
<td>Locating and examining cases that disconfirm the researcher’s expectations and tentative explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>This involves self-awareness and critical self-reflection by the researcher on his or her potential biases and predispositions as these may affect the research process and conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern matching</td>
<td>Predicting a series of results that form a “pattern” and then determining the degree to which the actual results fit the predicted pattern (p. 188).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kvale (1995) has presented a comprehensive discussion on qualitative research validity. He approached the topic through his personal experiences as a psychologist breaking away from the scientific trinity of psychology—reliability, validity and generalization. He adopted a moderate post-modern position by rejecting the notion of a universal truth and accepted “the possibility of specific local, personal and community forms of truth, with a focus on daily life and local narrative” (pp.20-21). He presented an understanding of validity that starts in the lived world.
and is linked to components of social interaction. Elements of truth correspond to the objective world and Kvale was focused on the relationship between what is considered truth and its practical consequences for the respondents (p. 23). For Kvale, validity was linked to craftsmanship, communication and action. Like Lather, Kvale cited certain action oriented methodological techniques that could establish basic criteria for qualitative research. Kvale organized these techniques into seven stages of research: thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying and reporting (p. 26). Although convinced that researchers should engage in such processes to secure validity, he also argued that researchers should not be overwhelmed by the validation of their research choices. He has cautioned researchers to avoid, “legitimation mania,” (p. 33) and asserted that although validation is important, preoccupation with its pursuit may not lead to convincing arguments. His suggestion to seek research validity through reasonable means made sense to me.

I have also embraced the belief that validity begins with the researcher’s truthfulness about what happens in the research process and extends from the first contact with respondents to the final interpretation of data that accurately represent what was discovered through the inquiry process. Reinharz (1991) has identified “feminist action research” as one type of methodology that is, “oriented to social and individual change because feminism represents a repudiation of the status quo” (p. 175). DeVault (1999) has compared the research process with the act of excavating. For me, this has created an image of the research process as one which uncovers and raises the voices of women who have been excluded from the scope
of previous bodies of research. Guided by the writing of other women researchers, I concluded that feminist qualitative research methods would most fully examine the role of and facilitate change for public school secretaries who have been overlooked by the educational research community.

**Feminist Qualitative Research**

There are a triad of considerations—preparation, purpose, and practice—that require examination prior to initiating research. For feminist qualitative researchers, preparing to enter a research endeavor includes intentionally investigating research questions pertinent to the lives of women and acknowledging the premise that one of the primary purposes for conducting research is to facilitate change for and/or with the researched. The researcher must also use a process that requires the researcher to be keenly aware of the relationship between herself and her participants as they pursue research questions together. Ultimately, the researcher employs methods and procedures that typify qualitative research and reflect the inclusive nature of feminist theory.

Thompson (1992) referred to feminist researchers as "constructed knowers" (p. 11), who move beyond the idea that academic disciplines and methods are the only sources of authority in creating knowledge. The researcher becomes a source of knowledge by analyzing her own experiences and those shared with research participants. Thompson stated:

> Constructed knowers attend to the world and people around them. They seek firsthand knowledge of the people and settings they want to know. They give as much weight to people’s experiences as they do to abstract theories and
concepts. Knowledge is generated through dialogue, listening and talking. The self is an instrument of inquiry. Knowers find connections between themselves and their subject matter.… Constructed knowers have a high tolerance for complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction (p.11).

The feminist qualitative research process, considered a structured framework because certain procedures are employed by most researchers (i.e. interviews, observations, self-reflective analysis), has an element of nonconformity that allows researchers the latitude to employ particular strategies suited to individual research projects. Bloom (1998) expressed this idea well and stated, “Feminist methodology resists normalization and attempts to falsely stabilize it; it is created through situated relationships and social contexts; it is internally conflicted as a sometimes conformist and sometimes subversive practice…it is continually being constructed in language and discourse” (p. 138). For me, the unconstricting framework of feminist qualitative research freed me from rigid research practices, and leveled the playing field between myself and the women I wanted to engage in research.

Allen and Baber (1992) referred to feminist research as research for women rather than about them. An aspect of feminist theory that can be considered a foundation for feminist research is the concept of inclusiveness. Fine (1992) stressed that feminist research must acknowledge issues of oppression related to race, class, gender, and disability. DeVault (1999) addressed inclusiveness and political action in her definition of feminism, and stated, “Feminism is a movement, and a set of beliefs, that problematize gender inequality. Feminists believe that women have been subordinated through men’s greater power, variously expressed
in different arenas. They value women's lives and concerns, and work to improve women's status" (p. 27). Emihovich (1999) asked educational researchers to respond to the question, "Whose interests are served by research?" (p. 37). Basic premises of feminism and feminist research theory coupled with qualitative research methodology gave me the confidence to answer Emihovich's question because I knew that through the use of the rigorous, valid, and ethical research practices I had chosen I would be serving the interests of public school secretaries.

**Ethical Treatment for All**

Ebbs (1996) addressed the benefits of qualitative inquiry and stated, "The researched become agents of knowledge, co-creators scrutinizing the authenticity of texts, while researchers have a mode of textual and inter-contextual analysis and are privy to processes which have ethical standards" (p. 219). I enjoyed this statement very much because it mentioned the subject of ethics in the research process, a subject only minimally addressed in my past research training. Ethical treatment of research participants was important to me and to find that there was a research paradigm that placed equal importance on the issue was heartening. As I discovered through a review of the topic, utilizing ethical research practices is central to all aspects of feminist qualitative research methodology.

Employing ethical fieldwork practices is a consideration that has crossed all social science disciplines. Issues of informed consent, confidentiality, respondents' rights, participation and involvement in data collection and interpretation are common topics in the discourse on ethics and research. The Association of Qualitative Research Practitioners, an organization involved with business and
marketing research for many businesses in the United Kingdom, has established a code of conduct to promote the group's professional standing. The well-being of respondents is viewed as a responsibility of the members of this organization. Earlier in the 1990s the group recommended some basic procedures for ethical researcher/respondent conduct which included: making sure the rights of respondents take priority over the rights of commercial clients; gaining permission for any audio/video recording and information concerning how the recording will be used; assuring respondents of their freedom to withdraw from the research process; honoring appointments and time agreements; and identifying the client/clients purchasing the services of the research organization (Curtis, 1999). Medical researchers have increasingly used qualitative research methods to study sensitive subjects like HIV-AIDS and this has resulted in a heightened awareness of the need to protect their participants' identities. Researchers are also being required to secure on-going consent and to remind participants of their rights throughout the interview and observation processes of inquiry. Morse (1998) stated:

The first problem for qualitative researchers is the issue of confidentiality. We use actual data, transcribed interviews that are unadulterated except for the removal or substitution of names. What each participant said becomes the text or data with which we work and segments of this text are published in final reports as exemplars. Therefore, we cannot and do not maintain confidentiality in the strictest sense of the term. To overcome this problem, the informed consent form must explain this release of data by
containing a statement such as, 'Some of your statements or story will be published.' (p. 302)

Lipson (1996) reported that the United States Department of Health and Human Services guidelines issued to social scientists engaged in research funded through grants from the government require that informed consent address three elements that impact on a respondent’s decision to participate in a research project. These included general competence; voluntary consent; and an understanding of information concerning the purpose of the research project that must be shared prior to gaining signed consent.

Much of what has been written on field ethics has addressed various obligations that the researcher has toward individuals being researched. VanMaanen (1988) and Liberman (1999) both discussed basic obligations of the social researcher relative to research respondents. These obligations included respect for the context within which the respondent was being observed, responsibility to investigate the phenomena addressed in the research project, supporting research with social theory, and allowing for the possibility of transformation through the research process. Richardson (1997) discussed how, "Postmodernist writers decry speaking for other and seek a principled solution by using their skills and privileges in the service of those they have researched" (p. 111). She pointed out that there are no set practices that can insure this ethic of service is applied universally in sociological research. Instead, she focused on the problem of "how to write it so that the people who teach me about their lives are honored and empowered, even if they and I see their worlds differently" (p. 106).
Issues addressed by Richardson that I found most relevant to my research situation included authority and authorship in the writing process, reflection on my privilege as the writer, and the ability to write so the voices of my respondents are heard and acknowledged by others. These topics supported my willingness to openly acknowledge the importance of the contributions made by research respondents, and coupled with the models presented by other feminist researchers were powerful influences that effected my choice of methods.

Although guided by questions and themes introduced by the researcher, data collection methods used in feminist qualitative inquiry are more inclusive and encompass both researcher-generated and respondent-generated topics. Feminist researchers have described this as a shared process where the interviewer and the interviewee have the freedom to ask each other questions and investigate topics together. Bloom (1998) viewed this shared process as means for establishing equality in the researcher/respondent relationship. She stated:

Feminist researchers strive for egalitarian relationships with their respondents by making space for them to narrate their stories as they desire; by focusing on issues that are important to respondents; by returning transcripts to the respondents so they can participate in interpretations; and by respecting the editorial wishes of the respondents regarding the final product of text (p. 18).

Confronting issues of power within the research process had been one of my concerns as I entered interviewer/interviewee relationships.

Because of my level of education and number of years I have been teaching, my salary was more than double, and in some cases triple, the salaries of the
secretaries I had directly worked with. I knew this would also be true of the secretaries I was going to interview. Wolf (1992) pointed out that unequal power between the researcher and the researched has been a general dilemma of fieldwork that stems from the different positions of the researcher and respondent relative to race, class, education, age and employment. As I reflected on issues of power between myself and my respondents I was cognizant of the need to carefully choose questions and monitor my responses in an effort to create an atmosphere of sharing that would manifest the respect and gratitude I had for the women participating in my research project. Critical self-reflection of reflexivity is one of the most useful tools used by feminist qualitative researchers to keep us engaged in ethical, truthful practices. It enabled me to enter into the interaction phase of the research process prepared to address possible problems, and the practice of self-reflection helped me maintain my intention of using the research process to create positive change for the women involved.

Political Issues

As I close this discussion on the various considerations relevant to qualitative inquiry, I feel compelled to briefly address the political aspect of feminist qualitative research. After reading the work of a number of feminist researchers, I noted their discussions on the political nature of research committed to issues related to women. I surmised that feminist qualitative research projects were sometimes judged as a means to advance a political agenda. I realized that members of the research community might view research on a designated group of women with skepticism or contempt, especially those researchers committed to traditional
notions of objectivity and neutrality in the research endeavor. Weiler (1998) pointed out some time ago that feminist research was *politically committed* because of the rejection of the possibility of value-free research. She also openly discussed the link between research and the pursuit of rights and stated that “feminists instead assert their commitment to changing the position of women and therefore changing society” and this “overt commitment of women's rights” (p. 59) creates a political agenda. Lather (1991) used the term *political empowerment* to describe the outcome of social research that would empower those involved in the research process to actively seek change. Lather specified that the empowerment she described was not the “term used by privileged individuals who are seeking self-assertion, mobility and the feeling of power, but a political term that analyzes the causes of oppression for individuals and groups” (p. 4). Lather's discourse on critical inquiry is characterized by the call for change or action that is focused on the experiences and requests of specific groups who are working for cultural change. Fine (1992) discussed the relationship between political ideology and activist scholarship. She advised authors of research to be clear about their political and theoretical stance, to frame analysis within social context, and to include “possibilities of what could be” (p. 221) in research narratives. Early in the research process I had reflected on the elements of critical theory that are associated with change and empowerment for research participants. These ideas were key foundational concepts for my research. However, I had reflected sparingly on the political nature of my project and Fine's advice pointed out the need for me to do so.
I initiated reflection on my political stance by acknowledging my frustration with the way public school secretaries had been excluded from the broad research base focused on public education and by the ways these women are slighted on the job. Casanova (1991) attributed this exclusion to the organization of public schools and called for more research. Shakeshaft (1989) candidly discussed how the field of educational administration was androcentric and characterized by gender polarization. Her discussion of the engendered nature of school administration articulated the reality of the domain in which the role of the school secretary has historically been integrated and sharpened my realization that the feminization of the office, a topic previously discussed, extended into the realm of public education. Wolf (1992) stated, “Our agenda, whether we are engaged in adding to the descriptive material on women’s experience or in building theory, is to expose the unequal distribution of power that has subordinated women in most if not all cultures…” (p. 119). Wolf’s statement forced me to refocus on the intent of my research. Although concerned that school secretaries as a group are confined to subservient roles maintained by the male-dominated structure of public schools, my most serious intentions were to give them an opportunity to voice their perceptions and to pursue the possibility of positive change that can be afforded through the research experience.
Employing the Research Process

Data Collection

As I planned the stages of my data collection I was guided by my desire to elevate the voices of school secretaries and bring their words to fellow educators. My initial concern was finding members of this group, outside of the schools where I had worked, who might want to share information with me. I decided to begin the data collection process by distributing a questionnaire designed to gain demographic information, general perceptions about the role of school secretaries, and the names of research respondents willing to be interviewed. Interviews would be followed by e-mail correspondence and participant observations. The duration of contact with individual respondents would be guided by the extent participants were willing to continue in the research process and by data saturation, “the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 68). I planned at least two telephone interviews and more in-depth work with a select group of secretaries who had devoted their careers to the role of school secretary. As I reflect back, I realize that I entered the research process armed with research methods and hope, hope that there were women wanting to be heard.

The Questionnaire.

I used a questionnaire to launch the research process. I was pleased to discover that using such a research tool did not overlook the impact of the activity on participants. As Peterson (2000) pointed out, even self-administered questionnaires are a form of communication and require some indirect level of consent on the part of the respondent to secure meaningful information. He stated, "All research
employing questionnaires is intrusive and competes for the time and attention of study participants, who likely have little incentive to answer questions" (p. 3). With this cautionary point in mind, I wanted to create an instrument that would be understandable, easy to complete, and would require the least interruption in the participants' working situation. To develop a questionnaire that was more likely to be completed, Peterson (2000) and Fink & Kosecoff (1998) suggested the use of a pilot group to gain feedback and helpful criticism. I addressed this preliminary research activity by arranging to meet with a group of local public school secretaries and asking them to act as my pilot group.

On the evening of July 12, 2001, I met with twelve secretaries, most of whom I had known for several years, at a local restaurant. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss my proposed research project on public school secretaries and to explain my intent regarding our meeting. I explained how the research process could afford public school secretaries an opportunity to speak for themselves and share personal perspectives on the roles they play in the public school setting. I related how I would need to serve two masters. I described the first as an extrinsic force, the mainstream educational research community. I shared how the second was an internal force, my commitment to employ ethical research practices, and I hoped to facilitate change and offer opportunities to the women I would be studying.

To satisfy the first force, I explained how I would need to sample a large number of public school secretaries from a variety of school settings. I also explained that because I had decided to use a questionnaire to survey participants and solicit volunteers for future interviews, I needed their assistance. The twelve
women willingly examined the contents of my proposed mailing. They read the letter
of introduction (Appendix A), examined the questionnaire (Appendix B), and then
made several helpful suggestions. The group addressed various topics I had
included on the form, such as: common clerical duties; interaction between
secretaries and other school employees; salary and benefit items; and issues related
to job responsibility. They also offered valuable recommendations concerning an
acceptable time frame for sending the documents to schools, and candidly
discussed the level of interest school secretaries might have in participating in such
a project. They discussed what it would take for them to notice an envelope
addressed to the school secretary and the reasons why they would open such an
envelope. They suggested simple things like the use of a handwritten address
instead of a mailing label and the notation, free gift enclosed, so that more
secretaries would open the envelope to find the incentive, a bookmark (Appendix C),
that I had enclosed. They reinforced what I had read in texts regarding the creation
and use of questionnaires or surveys and allowed me to understand how they would
respond to a similar request for participation in a study. Only a group of individuals
like those being contacted in the research project could supply such astuteness.

As mentioned before, the use of the questionnaire was determined to be
important because it would allow me to collect general demographic information and
satisfy methodological concerns. However, the most significant reason for
dispersing a questionnaire was to generate a list of potential interview participants.
To recruit volunteers I enclosed a personal information form (Appendix D) and a self-
addressed, stamped envelope with each questionnaire. The intent of the form was
to gain access to names, addresses, phone numbers, or e-mail addresses that would enable me to contact potential volunteers.

I mailed a total of 212 questionnaires to public school secretaries representing 151 of the 371 school districts in Iowa. Distribution of the questionnaire was based on school district enrollment and nature of the secretary’s probable assignment (i.e. elementary, middle school or high school). The distribution reflected current enrollment trends, although larger school districts were slightly over represented in the mailing. Using the Iowa Educational Directory for the 2000-2001 school year, I calculated that 68 percent of the school districts in Iowa have student enrollments under 1000, 87 percent under 2000, and 92 percent under 3000 (Iowa Department of Education, 2000). Of the questionnaires mailed, 79 percent were mailed to districts with student enrollments under 3000. Because of the greater number of elementary schools available for contact, 50 percent of the questionnaires were sent to elementary buildings, 25 percent to middle schools and 25 percent to high schools. Envelopes were addressed: To the Secretary at: the name of the school building.

Of the 212 questionnaires mailed, 147 were completed and returned for a response rate of 69.34 percent. I reviewed information addressing acceptable response rates and found a variety of attitudes. All authors proposed ideal rates of 95 percent or better, but went on to discuss more common response rates. Fowler (1993) discussed how some marketing researchers and government offices would accept rates as low as 20 percent (p. 40). He went on to suggest that most researchers hoped for response rate approaching 70 percent. This was the rate
also described as, adequate, in the writing of Fink and Kosecoff (1998). They stated, "All surveys hope for a high response rate. No single rate is considered the standard, however. In some surveys, between 95% and 100% is expected, in others 70% is adequate" (p. 50). Woodward (1987) completed thesis research on Iowa secretaries working in community colleges. She used a survey instrument to collect data related to specific job tasks. She based her statistical analysis on a return rate of 20.7% (p. 62). With this information in mind, I was comfortable with the number of responses I had received and I had achieved my primary goal of soliciting volunteers for interviews. I had hoped for at least three contacts from each school-size category and that was exceeded.

The following table summarizes the distribution and outcome of the questionnaire mailing.

Table 2. School District Enrollment and Questionnaire Response Information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Questionnaires Sent</th>
<th>Questionnaires Received</th>
<th>Volunteers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 300</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 to 599</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600 to 999</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 to 2999</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3000 to 4999</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5000 to 10,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10,000</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I had chosen a calendar date as the point for initiating the next stage in data collection. Within one month of the initial mailing, I had received 140 of the responses and 43 of the contact forms. I was prepared to begin the interview process.

**Telephone Interviews.**

As Madriz (2000) pointed out, "The two major techniques used by researchers to collect qualitative data are participant observation and individual interviews" (p. 835). I had planned to do both, but knew that I would have to take into consideration personal limitations. I had decided that I would conduct phone interviews because of time constraints imposed by my full time employment as a teacher. I also realized that the secretaries I wanted to interview were very busy people, too. Webster's (1996) reflection on time was pertinent to my situation. He stated:

>This time element pervaded my interviews. I was constantly aware that my talking with these people was infringing on their daily plans. I am sure they were aware of it, too. And, in part, I think this is what made my phone interviews productive (p. 191).

I wanted to establish a significant level of trust with my respondents. I knew this would depend on establishing "deep rapport" (Bloom, 1998, p. 150) and to negotiate these elements of the researcher/respondent relationship, I wanted the women I would be working with to realize that I would be courteous and considerate of their needs, particularly needs relating to time concerns. The telephone would be a primary instrument in the research process and I would employ it carefully.
I attempted to contact the 44 volunteers by telephone. Several volunteers had shared their school telephone numbers and that prevented me from contacting them on the weekend, so I used e-mail contacts to request home phone numbers and addresses. Six of the volunteers responded with this information and I successfully completed introductory phone contacts with 27 volunteers. The initial phone contact allowed me to personally introduce myself and to explain the nature of the study. I was also able to discuss the use of the consent form (Appendix E) and advise the volunteers about the procedures outlined by the University regarding the use of human subjects in research projects. I explained that they would be asked to sign the consent form and return it in the enclosed, stamped and self-addressed envelope, and that I would send them a copy for their records. I explained that after receiving the signed consent form, I would be telephoning again to schedule interviews. I mailed 27 consent forms and received 18 signed forms. All school-size categories and student age levels were represented and I decided it was time to initiate the interview procedure. The purpose of the next round of telephone calls was to set up appointments for the interviews at times that were convenient for the respondents. I followed the same procedure when setting up the second round of interviews.

The initial recorded telephone interviews consisted of questions (Appendix F) I constructed based on the primary research questions I had posed and the trends I had noted following a preliminary analysis of the questionnaire responses. Questions used in the succeeding phone interviews (Appendix G) were based on themes that emerged from my analysis of the first interview transcripts. Procedures
for possible e-mail correspondence would be established following the telephone interview and content of e-mail messages would again reflect themes from the second interview.

Throughout the initial contact process respondents were made aware of the various methods and strategies used to compile data. All of the participants were aware that the interviews were tape-recorded and were being transcribed by myself or a third party. The consent form had explained this and I also discussed this with each participant. I reviewed the need to use a pseudonym and assured each interviewee that all possible identifying information would be masked or omitted from the transcripts and the final written document. Respondents were afforded the opportunity to choose their pseudonym or accept the name I would assign. Three of the eighteen women selected their own pseudonym. I encouraged the volunteers to ask questions at any time and to keep in mind that if there were parts of conversations that they preferred to keep off the record that was agreeable to me. The secretaries were informed that copies of their individual transcripts would be available for review and that they were also welcome to read the final document. I wanted the respondents to realize that the information garnered through research was not exclusively mine. By employing a research technique called member checking, I would be able to acknowledge the respondents' contributions and check my own listening/recording accuracy. In this way I could "cross-check" (Janesick, 2000, p. 393) my research data and strengthen validity.
E-mail Correspondence.

I used e-mail correspondence prior to the second interview (Appendix H). Following the first interview I had asked respondents for suggestions concerning the phone interview process. Several participants had mentioned that it would have been nice to have been able to read the questions prior to the interview so that they would have had some time to prepare. Keeping this in mind, I e-mailed the questions to 16 of the interviewees and mailed the questions to two of the women who preferred to correspond through the mail as they did not want to use their school e-mail for the project. Prior review of the questions seemed to facilitate the second round of interviews and some respondents had even prepared notes for the discussions. However, there were some considerations I needed to address concerning the use of electronic interviewing strategies. Fontana and Frey (2000) pointed out that, "It is also virtually impossible to preserve anonymity in Internet e-mail surveys...." (p. 667). With this in mind, I amended examples of e-mail messages used in appendices included in this document or considered them part of my field notes.

At the conclusion of the second round of telephone interviews I completed a cursory review of my notes and again narrowed the number of themes based on common responses from the interviews. While waiting for the transcriptions to be typed, I did contact the entire group of 44 volunteers to let them know how my research was progressing and the topics that I would be focusing on for my final analysis. I used two e-mail messages. The first message (Appendix H) went to the 26 members of the group who had not participated in the interviews. The main
purpose of this contact was to acknowledge their effort in returning the contact sheet and to let them know that I had pursued my research project. I received responses from four of these women.

The second message (Appendix I) was sent to the 18 interview participants, including the select members of the group with whom I would be making future contacts. I had told each respondent at the closing of the second interview that I would be narrowing the focus of my questions and I would be using a smaller group of participants for concluding activities. I shared that I had been looking at common characteristics among the members of the interview group and had decided that years of service to their school districts and school district size would be the factors I used to create a smaller focus group. I assured the participants that I would keep them informed of the on-going process and that I would do this through e-mail. I continued to e-mail updates to the group of 18 interviewees during the remainder of the research endeavor. Because e-mail responses include personal information that could reveal the identity of the respondent, I have not included any of those forms in the appendices. I added this type of correspondence to my field notes.

On-site Observations.

In an earlier discussion, I addressed how I chose a select group of respondents who would represent other secretaries stationed in similar job settings around the state. My initial intention had been to meet with all members of this group at a given time and place, using what Madriz (2000) defined as a focus group technique for data collection. She stated, "The focus group is a collectivistic rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of
participants' attitudes, experiences, and beliefs" (p. 836). The use of a focus group would have allowed me to observe and record the interaction of these women who have so much in common, and yet, as I would find out from my observations and continued phone contacts, so isolated from one another. Such an activity would have enabled me to gather a great deal of information in a short amount of time. However, the logistics of arranging such a meeting became an obstacle that could not be conquered. Participants would have been required to sacrifice personal time (a Saturday) to travel to a central location, which meant two to three hours of driving time for some of the women. Establishing a date to implement the process was even more difficult. I spoke with three of the respondents and was unable to designate one Saturday in the month of February when all were available to meet. After studying a map of Iowa, and discovering that there were no mutually acceptable Saturdays for half of the women with whom I wanted to meet, I employed researcher prerogative and changed my research plan. I decided that I would be the one to travel and I would employ on-site observation strategies.

Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2000) pointed out some basic assumptions about observation, quoting Adler and Adler who described observation as “the fundamental base of all research methods” (p. 673). They also presented the idea that observation is interactive and there was a collaborative nature in the process. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also touched on this theme and stated, “Observers now function as collaborative participants in action inquiry settings” (p. 634). It was my intention to keep the respondents whom I would be observing actively involved in the
process and let them take the lead in what it was I would be doing during my time in their schools.

Again, I made telephone contacts to set appointments for the observations. I reassured each secretary that my intention was not to interfere with their duties or schedules in any way and that I hoped to get a snapshot of what their working situation was like. However, I also informed them that if there were any particular things they wanted me to see or topics they wanted to discuss, we could use the time to do that. I asked each of the women if they would help facilitate the activity by asking their building principals if my visit would be acceptable. I assured them that if the building principal had any reservation about the activity, I would refrain from observing. The respondents were very willing to discuss this with their principals and we arranged to use e-mail to relay necessary information. I completed three observations. Each was a unique experience with many common factors.

By using the various data collection methods elicited above, I accumulated a wealth of information about the career experiences and lives of the 18 interview participants I also gained a better appreciation for the general information and perceptions generated by the questionnaire. The information supplied by the pool of 147 public school secretaries provided me with ample resources to bring clarity to the themes that emerged from that document, the interviews, and the observational activities. I believed that on-going analysis had prepared me to complete the in-depth analysis of the main themes.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was not a *post-data-collection* option for me. I had engaged in an investigation that could have taken a full-time researcher an extended amount of time to complete and I had compressed the project into several months of evenings, weekends and holidays. I recognized from the onset that every decision I made about data collection and analysis would be leading me to the final document, my dissertation. To guide the analytic process of my research, I used the recommendations of Bogdan and Biklen (1992) regarding data collection and analysis. They stated:

...make analysis an ongoing part of data collection to leave you in good stead to do the final analysis after you leave the field...Force yourself to make decisions that narrow the study...in most studies data collection is like a funnel...discipline yourself not to pursue everything...The more data you have on a given topic, setting, or subjects, the easier it will be to think deeply about it, and the more productive you are likely to be when you attempt the final analysis....Develop analytic questions....keep your questions at a substantive level for the purposes of guiding your data collection...In the formal analysis, after you have completed data collection, you can speculate further (pp. 154-157).

I also used Johnson's (1997) listing of strategies from Table 1 to help me monitor my data collection so I would not overlook the components of research that I believed to be most helpful in preparing me for the final data analysis.
The *funnel* approach served me well. I used the preliminary background review of literature to formulate my first questions: Where was the history of school secretaries and why was it missing? After searching more thoroughly in the topics pertaining to clerical workers and school administrators, I was able to ask: Where was the voice of the public school secretary? and What did they have to say about the role they play in public education? The next phase in the research process was to find school secretaries willing to share their stories with me and I reached out to this group by using the questionnaire, this multi-purpose phase in data collection allowed me to gather demographic information, general perceptions of school secretaries and the names of women willing to talk with me. Analysis of the questionnaire data facilitated the creation of the first set of questions used in the initial phone interview. These questions were based on the trends I noted in the numerical response section and the comments contributed by the respondents. Following the first round of interviews, I analyzed the transcripts looking for common experiences and themes. I color coded the documents and identified the topics and concerns most frequently reported. At this point I narrowed the number of themes I would address in the second round of telephone interviews. I followed this funnel approach after the second interview and not only narrowed themes, but narrowed the number of participants I would be working with as well. The on-site observations ensued and the final coding of transcripts and field notes set the stage and provided data for the forthcoming chapters.
CHAPTER 4. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT THEY DO, WHAT THEY THINK, WHAT THEY HAVE TO SAY

The purpose of this chapter is to create an image of the public school secretary. My intent is to bring forth the perceptions of these women and reveal how common viewpoints, experiences, attitudes, and concerns shared my the respondents enabled me to focus on common themes. This chapter is a transition between method and theoretical analysis. It provides me with the opportunity to allow the research participants to construct their personae with their own words and perceptions. This chapter combines numerical information with narratives, underscoring the importance of the research participants in the research process. Only with their ideas and with their words, can there be a picture.

Demographic Information: The Numbers Make Sense

The following excerpt was taken from my first telephone interview with “Lilly,” a 52-year-old elementary school secretary.

Pam: Why did you want a job as a school secretary?
Lilly: Well, actually, I wanted a job because our kids were in school and I thought I wanted to—I had always been a stay-at-home mom—I wanted to make college tuition funds so I could put them through school and I still didn’t want to give up that mom-at-home when they got home, so ideally school was the place for me to work.

Pam: Any other reasons?
Lilly: Well, I think anyone that works in the school system obviously loves kids. And I have had the opportunity to move, to like the middle school or the high school if I chose. But little kids keep you young at heart and I love them, and I could never (move), I don’t think, as long as I don’t have to. I would always choose the elementary.

Pam: Are there other jobs you’ve held or preferred in the past?

Lilly: Actually, I was in retail clothing. Didn’t care for that. I worked in a doctor’s office. I did enjoy that, but that was many, many years ago, before our second child was born, and I just didn’t want to go back to that. I did start out, before I moved on to the school, for an area education agency….I also had, I guess I’ve let it expire now, I had a real estate license and sold real estate for awhile, but I only did it as a part-time job and you really have to do that full time and I don’t know, I like being around the kids better, I guess.

(Interview, December, 2001)

Eighteen years later Lilly is still with the kids, working in a building that houses grades kindergarten through sixth grade. Is Lilly a typical public school secretary? I believe she is, and here’s why.

The information I gained from the questionnaire participants supported Casanova’s (1991) observation that almost all elementary school secretaries are women. Out of the 147 questionnaires returned, 146 were completed by women. The age of the students does not appear to be an issue because the women represented all grade levels. Some secretaries worked in attendance centers that housed multiple age levels, like preschool through eight grade or seventh grade
through twelfth grade. A numerical breakdown indicated that 51 percent worked with elementary students, 25 percent with middle school students, and 24 percent with high school students. The sole male participant reported that he is 43 years old and has worked for the past nine years in an elementary school. With the exception of his sex, he could also be considered a typical school secretary.

Is Lilly's age typical for the response group? Yes, the average age for the group was 50 years. All of the participants were over 30 years, 84 percent were over 40 years, and 49 percent were over 50 years. Like Lilly, the group was experienced in the role of school secretary as well. Twenty-eight percent of the participants had assumed the role of school secretary for more than 20 years. Of the 81 percent who had worked for their school districts for more than five years, the number of years of service ranged from six years to 42 years.

The questionnaire response group also reported common elements of personal education. All were high school graduates or had earned a GED, and almost three-fourths had post-high school education or training. Of the group, 61 percent had additional secretarial or clerical training and 20 of those participants reported earning an Associate of Arts degree in clerical work. Thirteen percent of the group reported other educational experiences, with eleven of the women reporting bachelor's level degrees in a variety of fields. One secretary reported completing beauty school, another had earned an associate's degree in civil engineering, and a third reported graduate-level work in the sciences.

My analysis of the various duties reported by school secretaries was consistent with the limited information—primarily to lists of clerical duties—I had
found in my review of available literature. Participants' responses indicated that there are many universal tasks assigned to the school secretary, but these duties far exceed the realm of clerical work. I divided the tasks into subgroups which included: 1) standard clerical procedures; 2) working with the public; 3) helping children and other student-centered responsibilities; and 4) staff-centered responsibilities. As Hannah reported in our first interview:

Every day is so different is one thing that I find very gratifying. Every day is a challenge and every day is different so I never get bored and there's always a lot of choosing, prioritizing, etc., and I guess I'd have to really say, I feel like I'm more of an administrative assistant a lot since we have a principal that shares buildings. He feels that I'm capable to run the building when he's not there and I feel good that he feels that way. So, I see my position as more than just a secretary. (Interview, January, 2002)

Hannah, like 92 percent of the response group reported using the computer to complete work for the principal, other staff members, or the school district. She, and 90 percent of the group reported responsibility for answering the phone; she was also part of the 84 percent who also record and report phone messages, and the 70 percent who prepare special reports for the school district. Eighty-two percent of the group listed responsibility for sending and receiving FAX messages for their school. Other duties that Hannah did not list, but other participants did report included: 70 percent who were responsible for sending e-mails and memos throughout the building; 68 percent who are assigned to manage the hot lunch count; and 65 percent who send out information via the public address system.
Duties that serve the public include monitoring the phones and delivering messages. Other tasks that serve the public include working at the front desk and greeting/meeting the public. Ninety percent of the participants are responsible for these duties. Fifty-one percent of the secretaries prepare and disseminate newsletter the public, and 45 percent arrange the use of the school facilities by organizations outside of the school.

Student contact is not limited to greeting students at the front desk or assisting them in making a phone call. Many school secretaries, 51 percent of the response group, sell lunch tickets and monitor student meal-ticket charges. School secretaries have also assumed the duties of the school nurse, the teacher, the school counselor, and the principal simply because they are the only person in the office. Almost three-fourths, 73 percent, of the secretaries reported that they dispense medications to students. Another 69 percent monitor students who have been sent to the office for disciplinary reasons or incomplete work. One interviewee, Jill, a middle school secretary with 21 years of public school secretarial experience, explained her situation this way:

I get a lot of the kids who get kicked out of the classrooms and I have to deal with them and it seems like when they get into high school, those are the kids that come back and thank me, you know, for listening to them and for being there.....and we have a large population in our school that take medicine and that takes a lot of time out of my day....my medicine kids, it's like I refer to them as "my kids", cuz it's like during the year, I get really close to them because I see them every day. (Interview, December, 2001)
Secretaries also reported many duties that help educators, other support staff working in the school, and the school district in general. Foremost, they help the building principal.

Duties that were directly stated to be for the principal included: word processing; screening calls; making appointments and arranging meetings; finding substitute teachers, assistants, bus drivers and other support staff; and gathering information for state-level reports. Response group participants reported that 88 percent do word processing work for their principals, 81 percent complete extra duties such as arranging for substitutes, meetings, and special reports. Of the eighteen interviewees, all have manned the office when the principal or principals are out of the building and some act in this capacity more than 50 percent of the time.

Duties that are routinely completed for teachers included forwarding messages and 72 percent of the school secretaries reported that they are responsible for ordering supplies. Some secretaries reported that they do complete word processing work for teachers, copy materials, and occasionally monitor the classroom. Similar assistance was mentioned for teaching associates and other support staff. As I read and reread the questionnaires, as over 90 percent included comments or lists of other duties, I was amazed by the variety of tasks performed. The ability to be adept at multi-tasking had new meaning for me.
Personal Perceptions

I used Lilly's comments to point out that she had made certain choices about becoming a school secretary and continuing in that job. Had other participants purposefully chose public school secretary jobs? I believe they had. Responses to statements in a section of the questionnaire that was a five-point rating scale entitled, Job Perceptions and Job Satisfaction, suggested that most members of the response group wanted to work in the school setting. They also expressed positive responses related to expertise in what they do, how well they get along with other employees, and interest in maintaining their jobs. I have focused on eight of the reflective statements that are related to job choice and general satisfaction with the participants' current job settings.

In response to the statement, I took my current job because I wanted to work in a school: 77 percent of the participants agreed with the statement, 20 percent were neutral, and only 3 percent disagreed. Interview respondents provided further insight into the selection of their jobs. The following excerpts were responses to the question from the first interview, Why did you want a job as a school secretary?

Erin: The biggest reason is because of my family. We have (I've been at the school 20 years) we have five children. My husband, his job, (pausing) he leaves on Monday morning and is gone 'til Fridays. He, and so I wanted a job that worked around my kids' schedules as well as my own and I wanted to be home. I was the main person in charge of kids and I wanted to be home when they were home. Working at school is an ideal situation for a mom. (Interview, January, 2002)
Grace: Because when I started I had young children and the vacations would coincide with their vacations and it was in town. I wouldn't have to drive. It was pretty good wages for an in-town job. (Interview, December, 2001)

Marie: I think my initial reason why I wanted to work in a school is because my mom has worked for a district for almost 20 years and when I was going to college I was originally going to be a teacher, but at the time the teaching market was real flooded. I liked doing secretarial things so I thought, you know, the best of both worlds. I could still work in a school and utilize my skills and the second was that my mom worked in that district...The biggest plus right now is my oldest son is a second grader, so I’m where he is, which is a big plus, and I just, I enjoy being around kids and hopefully making some impact on them. (Interview, January, 2002)

Nan: Um, a couple of reasons. I had been working in a pretty stressful job in a prison situation and it was more than I had anticipated and so then I took some time off and I wanted to be home with my son who was a freshman in high school at the time and he was involved in activities and so I kinda liked the hours. Working during his schedule and I’d have time off when he did and the other one is, I enjoyed being around kids....I’ve enjoyed most of the jobs I’ve worked at. I enjoy this one probably the most because no two days are ever the same. You get to work. I really enjoy the kids, working with the kids....I’m able to be home in the evenings and have some summer time off. I really like that. (Interview, January, 2002)
The most common reason for working as a school secretary centered on hours and schedules that matched the schedules of the secretaries' own children. Of the 18 interviewees, 12 discussed how the job schedule was more acceptable to them as working mothers. Other frequently mentioned reasons included working in an educational setting, working around children, and time off in the summer.

The secretaries responded to the questionnaire statement, *I have expertise which allows me to fulfill my duties with success*, with a strong, positive rating. Of the group, 87 percent agreed with the statement, while 11 percent remained neutral, and only 2 percent disagreed. Interview respondents were not noted to criticize or demean their own work. In response to the interview question, *How does the role of the secretary impact on the operation of the school?*, respondents described the role as pivotal, very important, tone-setting, necessary, diversified, and invaluable. Amy, a respondent with seven years of experience as a junior/senior high school secretary described the role like this:

Amy: The secretary, a good secretary, keeps things running smoothly and tries to keep things under control and calm all the time. A good secretary's role is invaluable to the school system. They can see problems ahead simply because they are with the students and with the teachers in an unstructured time space that the administrator is not, or the teachers are not. So, you get to see more. You get to see their good points and you get to see their frustration that would not be shown to the other. (Interview, January, 2002)

Marie, a twelve-year veteran who works in a kindergarten through twelfth grade complex, responded with humor. She stated:
Marie: I'd say it's a very, very important role. Someone has always told me, I've heard this from several people, "Be nice to the secretaries and the custodians because they're the ones that run the school" (Marie begins laughing). They said, "If you really want to know who knows everything and can get you everything, that's the two people you really need." I never really thought of it that way, but they're kinda right. (Interview, December, 2001)

Paula, who has worked in an elementary setting for 14 years, described the role of school secretary as the "hub" because everyone comes to the centralized office and thus, to her with their questions and their confidences. Paula referred to herself as "a wealth of information" and the person who needs to know how to handle everything.

Paula: I guess the one thing that I do with others, whether it's the principal, whether it's the teachers, whether it's the parents or the kids, is, I just put myself in their place and it's between us tow and it doesn't' go any further. I think that's really the most important part about the job. (Interview, December, 2001)

Paula prided herself as someone who was fair and efficient and as one who got along with everyone.

Four statements were used to gain insight into how participants perceived their interaction with other school personnel. Eight-eight percent agreed with the statement, I work well with the principal in this building, 8 percent were neutral, and 4 percent disagreed. A strong majority, 83 percent, of the secretaries agreed with the statement, I feel appreciated by the principal 10 percent were neutral and 7
percent disagreed. I focused on the working relationship between the secretary and the principal in the initial and follow-up interviews as well.

The 18 interviewees shared a wide variety of stories about working with principals. Kate, the senior member of the interview group with 35 years of experience, had worked with several principals and had the following things to say:

Pam: What have you found to be the most gratifying about this position and what's kept you there so long?

Kate: Well, the hours are good, the same as my children through the years, and nice people to work with. I work with the kindergarten through fourth grade. I like the little ones.

Pam: Is that the level you've always worked with?

Kate: Yes. And I have quite a little responsibility. The principal doesn't tell me what to do. I just know what to do and I do it.

Pam: How would you explain your relationship with the principal?

Kate: Well, I'd say it's very good. The one I have now is 33 years old. I've worked for probably four or five principals through the years and I've been very satisfied with all but one of them. That was the first. And then I had two women principals that taught me most of what I know about computers. They'd stand behind me when I needed help cuz I started out with a manual typewriter and I'm up doing spreadsheets and so on.

Pam: Could you tell a big difference in leadership style or administrative style between men and women?
Kate: Well, the woman we had before this young man did a lot of documenting. We, if a child got in trouble, we made five copies. We put one in the file, we mailed one to the parent, the principal filed one, we gave one to the school board, and this one does very little of that. I don’t know if he keeps a file of any kind or if it’s just on his computer.

Pam: Anything else you can say about principals right now?
Kate: There’s quite a bit of difference. The one I had for 13 years came in with the, “everybody works at his own speed” idea. Well, then when that principal left, that theory was kind of scrapped...

Pam: Is your principal in the building all day?
Kate: Yes, he’s kindergarten through eight.

Pam: How does your role change when the principal is out of the building?
Kate: Well, a lot if the teachers have trouble with a student. They send them to the office and they sit on the bench by my desk and I kinda keep ‘em corralled. But if he’s not there, then the teacher has to take ‘em back and handle it themselves, so sometimes they sit there quite awhile before they realize that the principal’s not in the building. But my role doesn’t change too much. If we get a new student in, I basically do the enrollment process unless it’s an exceptional student. He says, ‘Kate knows more about it than I do.’ But I don’t do much different when he’s not there. He’s not gone a lot.

(Interview, December, 2001)

Not all of the secretaries interviewed could depend on the presence of their principals to the degree Kate was able to. Some of the interviewees had become
accustomed to the principal being gone as much as 50 percent of the time because of multiple building assignments. This arrangement did not seem to impact the quality of the relationships between building secretaries and their principals. Nan discussed what it was like to work with a principal who was the administrator for two schools.

Ram: How would you explain your relationship with your current principal?
Nan: Really good. One of the things with this particular job, she is spread between two buildings. She has another school with 120 students that she’s the principal of, so she’s only in our building part time. She’s in the building every day. It will either be morning or afternoon. We have a real good working relationship and if there’s a problem, I can always reach her by cell phone or call her at her other building. But she’s very good about, (pause), I know what I can and can’t do as far as a kid comes up for discipline. If it’s a minor situation, I can handle that and she has no problem with that.

Pam: So, would you say you communicate well with her?
Nan: Oh, very good. I can call her at any time and ask her anything and the same with me.

Pam: At your other assignment did you work with a male or female there?
Nan: Male. It was a different relationship there and I think part of that was the amount of stress, that you didn’t have time to communicate as often as now. Even though she’s not in the building as much, I communicate more with her. She will call in wherever she’s at and check in and see if you need
anything, if there's any questions, or do you, you know, need help and she
lets me know her schedule every day. (Interview, January, 2002)

Although the amount of time principals were out of their buildings varied from as little
as 10 percent of the time to almost 65 percent of the time, the secretaries reported
positive relationships with their current principals. Like Kate, other secretaries
related past experiences that suggested they differentiate between positive and
negative working relationships. Jane, who as worked at an elementary school for
over 20 years, was one of the secretaries who identified differences among the
various principals with whom she had worked:

Pam: How would you explain the relationship with the principal you work
with?

Jane: The one I have now, extremely well. In the past it wasn’t’ as good.

Pam: How many principals have you worked with?

Jane: I gotta think about that for a minute (pause) five.

Pam: Have they all been men?

Jane: Yes.

Pam: What were the differences between this extremely positive experience
and the one that wasn’t so positive?

Jane: The positive one will handle the problem, solve the problem, get right
on the problem and keep me out of it. The not so positive one didn’t want to
know about a problem because if he did, he had to do something about it.
And at that time there was a lot of problems going on. There wasn’t a whole
lot of unity in the building and that was one of the reasons, because if there
was a problem it never, never got handled. It just kept brewing and brewing and being in the office, you’re in the middle of everything all of the time.

Pam: What kind of expectations did people place on you then?
Jane: They would come to me, express the problem, expect me to go to the boss, and have it solved. When I would go to the boss, he would get angry at me. I started leaving notes. (Interview, December, 2001)

I will admit that I personally talk with the secretary prior to talking with certain administrators. I often call the secretary and ask her what kind of mood the boss is in and ask if it is a good idea to be interrupting him. Teachers and other support staff realize that the secretary will often act as a buffer between them and the administrator in the next office, and I personally appreciate this help. I do not believe this type of gate-keeping creates negative feelings between the secretary and other staff members. The response group secretaries also express positive relationships with these people.

Participants were asked to respond to two statements related to co-workers. In response to the first statement, I work well with the teachers and other staff members in this building: 99 percent agreed and 1 percent remained neutral. The statement, I feel appreciated by other members of the staff, also received a strong agreement rating, with 87 percent of the response group agreeing, 8 percent remaining neutral, and 3 percent disagreeing. Responses to interview question asking how the secretaries would describe their relationships with teachers and other support staff were generally positive. Some of the secretaries related how
they are remembered at holidays, birthdays and on Secretary's Day with gifts and cards.

Responses to statements related to on-going employment suggested that the participants plan to stay in their current jobs. Response to the statement, *I like my job and plan to stay in this assignment*, revealed an 87 percent agreement level, while 12 percent remained neutral, and 1 percent disagreed. Only 5 percent of the participants agreed with the statement, *I am seeking other employment*; while 82 percent disagreed, and the remainder were neutral. The high positive response level associated with liking the job of school secretary lead to this question in the first interview, *What do you find to be most gratifying about this position?* Three types of responses prevailed: being around the students; enjoying the responsibility and variety of tasks the job demands; and helping others. The most common was involvement with students. Some of the answers included:

Carla: Well, of course, when those little kids come in and give you a big hug, that’s the most gratifying (laughing). It’s probably the interaction with the kids, I would say is probably the most gratifying. (Interview, December, 2001)

Nan: Working with elementary students (Interview, January, 2002)

Robin: I just like watching the kids grow when they come in in kindergarten and when they go out in sixth grade, just to reflect back on how much they’ve grown. (Interview, January, 2002)

Marie: I think the most gratifying is, kids have graduated from school and they are either in college or married or have their own children or staring
families, and they come back to see me. This means to me that maybe I had some positive impact on their lives. (Interview, January, 2002)

Mona: You have a lot of responsibility and it feels good that the people, the people rely on you, and they trust you, and they just go to you for the answers. This just makes me feel good that they can come to me and trust me and I really like the kids, too. (Interview, December, 2001)

The combination of questionnaire information and interview contributions provided me with an extraordinary amount of data for review. Like Munro (1998) had modeled, I also had made it a priority to explain the nature of my project in detail and stressed my intention to use interview data as my primary source of data for interpretation. Munro reported to her research subjects her “hope that we would work in collaboration: (p. 10). I related to my interviewees that I would appreciate any views they wished to share. I tried to keep the questions as open-ended as possible to encourage the respondents to share their experiences and perceptions to the extent they felt comfortable. I stressed the reality that the voice of the public school secretary had been ignored and I hoped to bring this voice into the public domain. The responses I gathered were extensive and the trends I noted in the questionnaire responses were reinforced through the interview process. I came away realizing that the woman identified as the public school secretary possessed a heart of gold and a voice of reason.

As I continued to reflect on the research choices I had made, I was glad that I had used the questionnaire as a way to find interview participants, and also to guide the first interview. The questionnaire responses helped me formulate broad
questions that allowed the interviewees to discuss their ideas. The extensive
information gained from the first interviews illuminated the role of the school
secretary, and the words of the respondents helped create a picture of the school
employees Casanova (1991) referred to as, "the women in the principal's office."
I discovered common reasons for securing a job as a school secretary, and was
informed of the many positive aspects of the job. The interview group also identified
specific tensions and concerns associated with the job of school secretary
CHAPTER 5: COMMON PURPOSES, COMMON ROLES, COMMON PROBLEMS

After all the sifting, sorting, reading, and rereading of research data, I started to compare myself to my husband, an artist, as he goes through the process of mixing a ceramic glaze. I know he has carefully searched for the exact combinations of minerals and/or compounds that will help him create the effects he has envisioned for his pottery. Although I was not searching for such concrete elements, I was searching for the most prevalent themes in the secretaries’ narratives. I believed that focusing on the most common themes found in the interviews would enable me to accurately represent the views of the respondents. The women had generously shared their thoughts and beliefs with me and I wanted to analyze the themes that were important to the group and carried their voices. Van Maanen (1998) noted there is a need for balance between theorizing and reporting data. He suggested a combination of approximately one-third theory and discussion and two-thirds data and examples. Chapter 4 reported data and shared excerpts from narratives that would allow the reader to create a mental picture of the public school secretary. In this chapter, I analyze the themes that substantiate this picture.

Again I poured the data through my researcher’s funnel and three common elements or themes emerged. The first theme is focused on the premise that school secretaries are working mothers who have purposefully chosen the job, school secretary, because it fit with their personal lives. The second theme that emerged focused on the multiple tasks these women deftly perform in their working environments and how they perceive and manage the changing degrees of
responsibility assigned or relinquished to them by building principals. The third theme focused on common concerns regarding compensation, training, and administrative support.

The following interview segment was a representative example of a narrative response that touched on these themes. Early in the interview Robin had related that she had worked in her current job for 17 years and she had chosen the job because it worked into her family's schedule. Later in the interview she disclosed several work-place challenges and as the interview ensued, she shared some advice. As she stated:

Robin: You have to be flexible. You have to overlook the little things that don't get done. There will probably be times when you might have to stay quite a bit later than you had planned because that's the only time you'll get things done. It's very rewarding, but I would definitely tell a person who seems like they have to get things done every day and complete tasks that it probably won't happen. And that is one thing I had to change my point of view about when I started. That there will be days when you'll go home and you really didn't get a lot accomplished.

Pam: As far as what, the paperwork?

Robin: As far as the paperwork, I've had to go in Saturdays already just for a little peace and quiet to get a lot of the paperwork done. Stuff that didn't get done during the school day. There were too many interruptions.

Pam: Will the district reimburse you?

Robin: No, not usually. We do put down our time and try to take it off other
times, but that usually doesn't happen because you never find the time to take off other times.

Pam: Now, if you could have a little wish list, how would you improve your current working situation?

Robin: I just wish the pay was a little better for a secretarial position.

It seems like we do a lot of extra work and it doesn't show it in the paycheck (Interview, January 1, 2002).

Robin's reflections mirrored those of the other respondents. They too, discussed many challenges of the job, and questioned components of work schedules and wages. However, because of the compatibility between their jobs and their family responsibilities they preferred the school secretary job over other jobs. Working in the local school made caring for their own children easier. I considered the possibility that the job of school secretary was one that allowed for the incorporation of work and motherhood.

Common Purposes: School Secretaries as Working Mothers

As related in Chapter 4, 17 of the 18 secretaries interviewed were or had been working mothers. Several of the women, such as Lilly, Erin, Grace, and Kate related, that they delayed entering/reentering employment until the children reached school-age. At that time they sought school-based jobs so that their working schedules would more closely match their children's schedules. Other women left employment situations for school-based jobs for similar reasons. Nan and Tara both discussed other successful employment situations, one at a prison and another at a
Civil engineering firm, both vastly different from the school secretary job. However, these jobs had not worked into their family lives as well. The employment choices made by these women would fit with what some social scientists propose to be the reason why women settle for fewer job opportunities and employment rewards than men. Reskin and Padavic (1994) proposed that "women's primary orientation is to their families, not their jobs" (p. 39) and that this has imposed limits on career development. Other researchers question this view of working mothers, along with a myriad of other sociological questions that have been posed in relation to the topic.

What I had found interesting was that the school secretaries presented very clear rationales for why they had secured their current jobs and why they remained on the job for so many years. In her response to a question asking why she was working as a school secretary, Erin, a twenty-year veteran stated, "The biggest reason is because of my family. Working at school is an ideal situation for a mom" (Interview, January, 2002).

The incorporation of motherhood into work, or work into motherhood is a topic that has been extensively studied. Researchers have posed various views on the how women reconcile careers and childbearing. Terms such as life sequencing and life span development (Lerner, 1994) or family role staging (Voydanoff, 1987) have been used to discuss when women enter or leave employment to raise children. However, these views focused more on the separation between the two roles and the resulting conflicts.

One researcher, Garey (1999), also discussed how women incorporate motherhood into their lives. However, she addressed the need for work and
motherhood to weave together instead of being considered mutually exclusive. She argued that women should not continue to be confronted with two choices relevant to career and motherhood: 1) to stay at home and raise children, or 2) to pursue a career. She has proposed that American culture needs, "a way of understanding what it means to choose both, and we need a way of thinking about women's employment that doesn't presume a zero-sum relationship between women's commitments to employment and to their families" (p. 9). Garey pointed out how the need for this "weaving" work and motherhood has been discussed extensively by other feminist authors for more than twenty years and cited the mid-1970s work of Jessie Bernard, who called for research and policies which integrated the two concepts. As Garey related, "... there has been little research that attempts to answer Bernard's call for an integrated vision of the lives of women who are mothers and workers as 'unitary wholes' " (p. 13). She also suggested that national policies related to working mothers and attitudes in the business world could assist women in combining these two roles more painlessly. The most relevant thing Garey presented was the idea that women individually find solutions for the "structural complexities of combining employment and motherhood" (p. 194). I concurred with this point and contend that school secretaries who are working mothers have reconciled problems of childrearing and employment by choosing to work in the public school setting, often in the same school their children attend.

Garey identified three choices that mothers make related to when they enter or reenter working situations outside the home. She referred to these choices as *modes of sequencing* and described them as: planned reasons for entering
employment after motherhood; situational reasons for taking a job; and involuntary reasons for entering the work force. The school secretaries I worked with had motherhood-to-work histories that fell into each of Garey's choice-making categories. Jane reported that she had wanted to work in a school setting knowing how well the job would fit into family life and she related, "I was not a mother until eight years after I started working at the school" (E-mail, February, 2002). Tara's work at her children's school was a good example of a particular situation that convinced her to work outside the home, as she related, "I was doing a lot of volunteer work at the elementary where my kids went to school and one day I walked in the door and the principal said, 'Would you like to get paid for what you're doing?' and I said, 'Sure,' so I became a paraprofessional...and when the secretary's position came open I chose to be a secretary" (Interview, December 31, 2001). Sarah's full time employment outside the home was more involuntary in nature. She stated, "When I first went back to work it was after a divorce. I'd been working part time up to that and I needed full time work. I had three children of school age and I wanted to have more time with them, especially during the summer. (Interview, December 30, 2001). I believe the job of school secretary allowed the women in this study to make choices about where they would work and reinforced Garey's concept of weaving work and motherhood.

As I reviewed transcripts of the respondents' interviews I could not locate stories about job-related concerns that interfered with family life. They had shared many positive anecdotes about the supportiveness of principals and the flexibility of
the job that allowed them to meet family needs more readily. One e-mail respondent described her working situation this way:

I have been working here for 14 years. When I applied for the job I really wanted it for only one reason – so I could be off when my children were off. If you like spending time with your children, it is an ideal job, I think. I don’t think it is NECESSARY to be a mother, but it sure does help. (2-22-02)

This secretary touched on what I believed to be one of the positive side effects associated with the fact that so many school secretaries are mothers, other children reap the benefits of their experience. However, this can be seen as problematic for the secretary because childcare duties create extra interruptions and responsibilities. In the next section I have focused on the multiple duties and shifting responsibilities that characterize the secretary's job.

**Common Roles: Numerous and Ever-changing**

Colwill (1987) described the “invisibility” (p. 112) of secretaries in her call for more research on the role of the secretary. However, Colwill, like other researchers, had not singled out the public school secretary, and thus had not realized the high visibility of most public school secretaries. Some educators have addressed the visibility issue in the scope of public relations. Ediger (2001) pointed out that a good public relations program begins with the school secretary. He stated:

The school secretary might well be the first point of contact when entering a school building. Here is the first opportunity to demonstrate good public
relations with kindness, considerateness, and assistance to others. School secretaries need to be selected carefully using quality criteria, one being capabilities of politeness to visitors and the professional staff in school. Continuous inservice education needs to be in the offing for the secretarial staff. Secretaries need to develop and achieve. They need, in return, to be accepted and treated with respect. (p. 743)

I am in total agreement with Ediger's point of view. His proposal expressed the attitude that I believe all public school secretaries who are managing the office at their assigned building would welcome. I also contend that this is a highly visible secretarial role, not invisible as Colwill related. However, I have concluded that the role is difficult to define because of the wide array of tasks the school secretary has embraced or been assigned to complete. I have identified three sub-topics that address this issue. These included: the necessity to multi task in an extremely busy environment; the need to cover for the school nurse when she is out of the building; and the responsibility of acting as the stand-in for the building principal.

**Busy, busy days and the need to multi task**

Fran has been the school secretary in her building for over 23 years. She compared her decision-making to that of a triage nurse because of the multiple demands that are placed on her, often in a very limited time span. As she related:

> I feel many times when there's more than one person awaiting my assistance, I think I would best describe the one that gets helped first would be likened to the decisions that a triage worker would have in an emergency. I'm fortunate that I have staff and administrators that I can tell to wait a minute
and they won't take it personally or create a scene themselves.

Many times I'll have a person waiting for my assistance, an adult, and maybe a parent or a salesman or whatever, and I feel comfortable, you know, depending on the situation in asking them to wait while I help a student.

Many times I have found that parents just seem to know that our business is the children and lots of times will just enjoy watching the interaction between us. (Interview, January, 2002)

After observing in Fran's office one morning, I can see exactly why she chose the triage image to answer this question. Between 8:10 and 8:26 a.m. I observed twenty people come into the office specifically to speak to Fran or ask her for assistance prior to the onset of classes. Her desk sat in the outer area of a centralized, enclosed, but windowed, complex of office space and workrooms. Anyone needing to bring in a message, check in as a visitor, deliver freight, or make a phone call had to stand in front of Fran's desk when they entered the office. She had arranged her desktop for the convenience of children, with the phone sitting on a small pedestal located at the front left corner of her desk. A basket for memos and daily attendance slips has been placed directly behind the phone, and other materials were readily available for use by staff and students. She was able to accept in-coming calls at her desk, and in three other smaller rooms that adjoined her office area. The principal's office was enclosed and windowed in the same design as the outer office and was the fifth room in this complex. However, the principal's office offered quite a bit of privacy to those inside. Fran's work area offered none.
In 1998 a report entitled, *Future of Female-Dominated Occupations*, published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an international consortium focused on employment trends, researchers addressed gender segregation and the various problems experienced by the female employees who work in particular occupations. The report stated, "At OECD-level, three occupations appear to be outstanding examples of female-dominated occupations: secretaries, primary school teachers and nurses" (OECD, 1998, p. 8), and all three also belong to what the OECD referred to as service sector or helping occupations. The report pointed out that one of the dilemmas with service relationship careers was that the interpersonal-based services rendered by employees, although considered very important, are not always clearly defined. The report stated, "Interpersonal competencies are in general not identified or described and no effective method to evaluate them is actually available...Paradoxically, these skills are considered central to certain occupations" (p. 10). Thus, the school secretary must combine technological expertise, various types of assistance to others, enforce on-going rules and regulations, and stand in for the principal as needed.

In mid-February I observed Beth as she carried out her afternoon duties. I recorded a running record of the time she spent on various tasks. I recorded the clock time whenever a demand required her focus to change. Data was collected in this fashion from 1:15 to 3:20. During this time she changed activities 45 times. I have included a portion of the time record from my field notes.

1:15 A teacher came into the office and asked to buy a stamp. Another teacher came into the office and asked Beth for help with the copy machine.
1:18 Phone call: Beth took a message and called down to a classroom.

1:22 Phone call: Beth had to go down to the teacher’s room to check her phone which wasn’t working earlier in the day. Beth returned to the office and transferred the call.

1:25 Beth returned to her desk. She sorted some mail and filed a letter.

1:29 The principal came out of his office, gave Beth forms and discussed how she should go ahead and get or change substitutes for a teacher. Beth introduced him to me, we exchanged greetings and he returned to his office.

1:34 Phone call: Beth transferred the call to a teacher.

1:35 FAX came in. Beth retrieved it.

1:36 A student came in and reported other kids were wasting paper towels. Beth joined the student to check on the situation.

1:37 Phone call: Beth transferred the call to a teacher.

1:38 A girl came out of the nurse’s office and asked Beth to come into the nurse’s office to get her a cough drop.

1:40 Phone call: Beth transferred the call to the principal.

1:41 The guidance counselor came into the office. Beth introduced us and the three of us chat for about ten minutes. (Note: This was the longest segment of uninterrupted time recorded in the entire observation and the nature of this conversation took Beth away from two paperwork activities that needed her attention.) The counselor proceeded to tell her that he was leaving the building.

1:51 Phone call: Beth took a message to a student.

1:55 Beth worked on the lunch report.

1:58 Phone call: Beth talked with a secretary from another district building.

1:59 Beth continued the lunch report and explained several district reports that she collects data for and submits to the superintendent’s office.

2:02 A parent entered, greeted Beth, and signed the student checkout form.
In a span of 47 minutes Beth refocused her attention 19 times. Throughout this on-going barrage of interruption and interchange, Beth was friendly, greeted everyone by name, and seemed relaxed. Following dismissal, we finally had a chance to talk. She explained that this was a relatively quiet afternoon and less hectic than the morning had been because the school nurse was in the building.

She also discussed her responsibilities to the teachers and the students when the principal is out of the building. She pointed out that the little boy who had been acting out so loudly in the principal's office could have been her responsibility if the principal had been gone because the guidance counselor, who covers for the principal in crisis management with this child, was absent. Beth related that in such instances other staff members would come over from the another district building to work with the boy. However, that could take quite a bit of time, as the building was almost ten miles away. She discussed how this made her nervous at times, but that she had established some rapport with the little boy and she was not afraid to monitor him for a short period of time.

Beth took me on a tour of the building, and when we finished our time together Beth offered to be of further help in the future. I thanked her for her time and apologized for any inconvenience I had created. It was 4:00 and I knew that I could stop working if I chose to. Beth, on the other hand, still had to finish award certificates for a sports banquet later in the evening.

The afternoon I visited Erin, who has worked in a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade building for 20 years, was very similar. During this observation, the
weather was interfering with secretarial duties. Blizzard warnings had been posted for counties south of the district and the middle school wrestling team was slated to leave for a meet in a district that was reportedly dismissing school early because of the weather. The principal and athletic director were not in school that day and Erin was receiving phone calls from other secretaries and staff who were wondering if the wrestling meet was cancelled. Between 12:40 and 1:30, when the wrestling meet was finally cancelled, she talked on the telephone eleven times and seven of the calls were related to this matter. As she stated, "Common sense would tell you that we shouldn't send kids out on a bus with such questionable weather. If you asked the secretaries, we could take care of the matter very quickly, but we have to wait."

While I was there Erin focused on many different tasks. I asked Erin what she would do if she had one hour of uninterrupted work time. She stated, "this week I would get ready for kindergarten round-up and start setting up the yearly school calendar for next year." She explained that she supposedly has a nine-month contract, but she works two weeks before school starts and two weeks after school dismisses. She also related that she had about two-and-a-half weeks of compensatory time accumulated from the current school year. She commented that there was always something to do. However, her job classification could be considered part-time because she does not work year-round and is paid by the hour.

The office areas in all of the schools that I visited were unique in appearance. The common factor for all sites was the location of the secretary's workspace. The secretary was truly in the center of all activity. Observation readily revealed that she wore many hats, including that of the nurse.
The school secretary as nurse

In my own employment setting I have observed the secretary working in the nurse’s office almost daily. My school has had a three-quarter-time nurse covering two buildings for several years. She is on campus from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. and when she is absent or unable to leave one building to go to the other, the secretaries in the building cover her duties. In the data I collected it was reported that dispensing medications was a common duty in the school secretary’s day. Fifteen of the 18 secretaries related information about nursing tasks and all mentioned giving medications. Sarah referred to the children who came to her office daily for medication as, “her kids” and Fran related that this duty may take one or two hours per day. Some secretaries, like Hannah, were not always secure in assuming nursing duties. Hannah related, “I think the worst decision of the day is if I should send kids home or not when they are sick” (Interview, January 27, 2002) Nevertheless, this duty was accepted by all the respondents. Lilly’s perspective summed it up well, “We have a school nurse who in only in our building maybe three or four hours a week. So, I’m kind of the quote nurse, too.”

I questioned the respondents about special training related to nursing duties. Over half related that they had minimal training or no training at all. Those with training were skeptical about the quality of the inservice exercises. Several secretaries mentioned watching a video in order to give medications to students.

The state of Iowa has provided school employees with materials to prepare for the “certification quiz” which allows teachers, secretaries, teaching associates,
and other staff to distribute medication under the guidance of the school nurse. The two requirements of this process have included watching a 30-minute video and passing a multiple-choice test with at least 75% accuracy. The types of medications distributed in public schools range from simple pain relievers to major psychotropics used to control aggressive behavior. Children with asthma, diabetes, and other chronic health problems are at times monitored with a healthcare plan created by the parents, the school nurse and other professionals. However, the school secretary is not included in the planning procedures even though she may have to help implement the plan simply because she is in the building all day.

After reviewing the OECD report, I concluded that the nature of this role, secretary-nurse, was related to the fact that nurses, secretaries, and teachers are all members of female dominated occupations that are categorized as service workers and are described as employees who perform work that helps others. Additional information from OECD's 1998 report also pointed out was that secretaries do not belong to what is termed “a regulated profession” (p. 49). Thus, work requirements are varied and determined by the employer. As a result, I believe it would not be uncommon for principals to assign nursing duties to the school secretary simply because her status as a mother would somehow qualify her for the responsibility.

As previously related in Chapter 2, many principals seem very comfortable allowing the secretary to perform a wide variety of duties, including temporary management of the school. This enables the principal to maintain school policies and procedures when away from the school building. The next topic addresses the fluctuating levels of responsibility faced by the school secretary as
a component of her relationship with the building principal.

**Standing in for the principal**

Reskin & Padavic (1994) stated, “A person with job authority is someone who sets policy or make decisions about organizational goals, budgets, production, or subordinates (for example, about hiring, firing, and pay)” (p. 91). These authors also pointed out that women lack authority in the work place because they are not hired for such positions, or are not trusted with the same levels of authority as men, even when they have been hired for positions of authority. I am convinced that many school secretaries are openly, or more often tacitly, cited as the stand-in for the principal when the building principal is away from the school. I believe this shared responsibility can be linked to three main reasons: the respect the principal has for the secretary's expertise; the presence of a collaborative relationship between the principal and the secretary, or the principal's need to preserve control of the school.

In English's (1994) discussion on leadership he addressed empowerment and described the transformational leader as “one who empowers others rather than subordinating others: (p. 122). One of the principals interviewed by Casanova (1991) during her research on elementary school secretaries stated, “She [the school secretary] buys into and operates within the constraints that I've laid down....She makes the same decisions that I make. She gets a pretty fine script that I write for her....I want her to be another me” (p. 104). I believe the principal quoted above is less concerned about empowerment than making sure his policies and procedures are enforced in his absence. However, a level of shared responsibility remains. Grace denoted this shift very clearly when comparing her role when the building
principal was in the building and when she was away. As Grace stated, "My role, definitely secondary. She is always in charge. When she is out of the building I'm in charge. And that is quite frequent" (Interview, December, 2001). Jill related how she and the building principal worked together to plan for her absences. When asked if her role changed, Jill stated, "Yes. I have to handle smaller discipline situations. When parents call I'm the one they talk to and I help them solve whatever. You know, just cover for her, help her out so she doesn't have such a big mess when she comes back" (Interview, December, 2001).

I found most of the secretaries I worked with in this research project had a clear sense of the extent of their supervising responsibility. As a group, they can be viewed as confident decision-makers. They were comfortable making routine decisions, and readily shifted levels of responsibility depending on the absence or presence of the building principal. Mona related that there was little difference in her role relevant to the presence or absence of the principal since the students and staff were used to coming to her first when needs arose. As she remarked, "They come to me and I decide whether it's something he needs to make the decision for, or whether I make the decision" (Interview, December, 2001). Mona had related her perceptions of this principal earlier in the interview. She reported that she enjoyed working with him and that he was excellent with students and stated, "I just can't imagine anybody being any better. Any student who comes in his office always comes out feeling better. He works very well with students. Gone a little too often though" (Interview, December, 2001).
One of the focus group secretaries shared a story that explored the extent of her ability to manage the school when the principal was absent. Erin appeared to have developed a working relationship with her principal that emerged out of mutual respect and empowerment. They worked as a team with a common focus on building a positive learning environment for students. Erin had worked for her district for over 20 years and with her current principal for the past 15 years. She described her working relationship with her principal as, "very good" and used the adjective, "great" to describe her boss. She explained, "He and I think along the same lines." Their working relationship appeared to be nurtured by trust and collaboration, and very probably out of the need for the principal to be represented by a capable person. Erin shared her perceptions on this relationship:

Pam: How does your role change when he's out of the building?

Erin: When he's in the building I do more of my administrative type work, you know, the bookwork, computer work, and those kinds of things. When he's out of the building I am more like, I do take more of the administrator's role. If there's any type of problem that I can handle, I just go ahead and do it. Discipline, I usually, if they need to stay in, I'll handle it. Otherwise, I leave it for him. I just more or less take on that semi-administrative role.

Pam: Have you and he worked out procedures?

Erin: Yes, and that is where he and I, we do think along the same lines. There's been a lot of times when I say I've made an administrative decision and we'll talk it through and it will have been the same thing that he would do, and if I'm not comfortable doing something, I won't do it. It's probably been
four years ago, my principal had some health problems and he was gone more than he was there. I mean, he was gone weeks at a time. Then he'd be back and then he'd be gone for days, so a lot of responsibility was left to me. Pam: Now I'm going to ask a funny question, Erin. Were you reimbursed for your extra work?

Erin: No! No! (She begins to laugh) (Interview, January 2, 2002).

As the following section will illustrate, school secretaries rarely, if ever, receive adequate compensation and support for all they do and all the roles they fill.

**Common Problems: Issues of Compensation and Support**

As I have noted, school secretaries have fragmented, busy days filled with routine office work, the necessity to perform nursing duties, and often they must stand in for the principal when she or he is absent. However, added duties have not equaled added pay for this group of public school employees. I noted that the secretaries expressed how they did not always feel prepared to implement these additional duties. The main factors that appeared to have the most impact on these issues were related to the part-time nature of many school secretary jobs, the lack of access to collective bargaining groups, and the lack of on-going training or networking opportunities. All these factors were compounded by the fact that almost 60 percent of public school secretaries work in rural school districts where options are limited.
Salary and benefit considerations

When I observed Beth we discussed wage issues and she related that her principal was very good about making sure she was compensated. However, the district was unwilling to extend her position to include year-round employment or allow the accumulation of vacation time. Beth related some of her frustration and mentioned that she had seriously thought about seeking another job.

Pam: What were your reasons for looking for another job?

Beth: Money, money. It was purely financial. My husband was retiring and I just thought that, you know, he's a fair amount older than I am and I thought if I'm gonna have a nest egg to speak of, that I should really be getting into something that pays a little better. My hourly pay isn't that bad, but because we have so much time off; it doesn't amount to a whole lot as an annual salary.

Pam: You're only paid when you're there then? Okay, and how many months out of the year do you work?

Beth: I usually work two to three weeks after school's out and about a week and a half to two weeks before we start back up. So, I would say, probably about 10 months.

Pam: Do you ever put in any overtime?

Beth: Almost never. I've just, I mean I've never been told not to. Sometimes I do it. I've been known to do it on my own.

Pam: I just wondered if they'd pay you if you had to work more.

Beth: Yeah, they probably would. They just know that I wouldn't do it unless
I had to, but I usually don't push it.

Pam: If you could improve your current working situation, what would you do?

Beth: I'd kinda like to see it be a longer term job maybe. I think possibly they could make use of me during the summer (Interview, December 29, 2001).

In the second interview I requested more information about salary trends, including each interviewee's starting salary, the school district's current starting salary for a secretary, and the current salary of the participant. In this interview Beth shared that she had talked to the superintendent about this question. She related that her starting salary in 1979 had been about $5.00 per hour and she did have 10 sick leave days per year which could accumulate to 120 days. Beth reported the following:

Beth: He said if they hired somebody now it would be $9.00. Which I told him I was glad to know because I thought, you know, they well may start somebody at what I was making.

Pam: So, you're still making a little bit more than a new person.

Beth: Yeah, a little bit. I always thought I wasn't getting paid anything for my years of experience, but I guess I am a little (Interview, January 30, 2002).

Beth also reported that benefits had somewhat improved over 22 years. She now had two personal days, five paid holidays, and health insurance.

The thought that your experience may not be valued was also noted by Grace, who also discussed this issue with her superintendent.

Pam: What is the present starting pay for secretaries at your district?
Grace: Well, I asked that. We haven't had a starting in....twelve years, so I did ask the superintendent. And he said at what I was making, which to me was a little (she begins laughing).

Pam: Well, thanks a lot! Now do you get a big fat raise for 21 years of experience?

Grace: That's what I thought! I thought, now wait a minute! This person's gonna come in and they're gonna start at what I ended at? That's not fair. When I started, I started at minimum wage. If I remember, it was somewhere around five and a quarter (Interview, February 3, 2002).

It was also brought to my attention that additional training, college hours and, for Beth and Sarah, a baccalaureate degree had little bearing on starting wages for school secretaries. They reported starting at minimum wage when they first entered their school jobs. There were exceptions noted in information supplied by the questionnaire participants. The highest paid secretaries in this response group did have four-year degrees. However, these women did not represent the group I had been studying. They did not work in the main office of a student attendance center; these women were employed in the central office setting as business managers, were designated to be superintendents' secretaries, or worked with very specific roles and no student contact, like board secretaries. It was noted that these women also worked year-round. The highest paid questionnaire participant earned $27,500 and had been employed 1.5 years. In contrast, the secretary from the questionnaire response group with the most years of experience, 38, reported an annual salary of $14,000.
Ironically, they were both board secretaries and assumed few of the responsibilities shared by the building secretaries.

**Part-time employment considerations**

During my exploration of the studies on working mothers I noted several reports on part-time employment and the limitations jobs of this nature create relevant to salary, benefits, and advancement. Although school secretaries were not singled out in the categories of employment termed secretarial, seasonal, or part-time in the hundreds of job categories listed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the job does fit the descriptions offered in the various texts I reviewed. Kemp's (1994) study of women and work pointed out that all part-time workers experience lower annual incomes. Kemp used government standards to define part-time employment. These standards were based on the number of hours worked weekly, and any rate under 35 hours per week was defined as part-time. I viewed this as problematic in relation to school secretaries because during the school year they are considered full-time employees. As Beth pointed out above and Sarah also discussed in the next interview segment, they did not consider their income from the school district a living wage because it was not year-round.

Sarah has worked in one of the larger school districts in Iowa for the past nine years. Her current salary was reported to be $10.37 an hour, but she was only allowed to works 10.5 months each year. Like Beth, she reported lack of income as one of the frustrations of the job.

Pam: What are some of the frustrations of this position?

Sarah: Well, lack of income. I would say lack of paid vacation. Even in the
'real world', let's put it that way, it's set up for every month you work, let's say you gain 4.5 hours toward vacation or time off. We work 10.5 months at the junior high and we get a total of five paid days a year. I can never increase that. It's set. Even if I work there 30 years, that's all the paid holidays I get. I can't earn vacation time. I think it's grossly unfair.

Pam: Do you have the benefit of setting your salary up over twelve months?

Sarah: No. The only twelve-month secretaries are the ones that work for administration downtown and the three high school secretaries.

Thus, full-time working status while schools were busiest seemed to mask the financial burden created by restrictions placed on the number of days school secretaries were allowed to work in a calendar year.

Variations in benefits

Kemp (1994) also reported on the benefits part-time workers are afforded. She stated, "In addition to low earnings, part-time workers typically have few benefits in their jobs, such as seniority rights, paid holidays, vacations, sick leave, or health insurance" (p. 189). School secretaries may be considered more fortunate than most part-time workers, because they receive a variety of benefits due to their "full-time" employment status I analyzed the benefits of the smaller focus group participants and discovered many differences. Five of the six secretaries earned up to 15 days of sick leave per year and could accumulate up to 120 days, the same number of days as the teachers in the district. Beth, however, could only earn 10 days per year and Kate could only accumulate 90 days. Paid leave varied even more. Grace reported no paid leave other than sick leave, while the others reported one or two personal
leave days. Kate and Jill reported bereavement leave. Kate, Jill, and Erin reported some family sick leave. Jill was the only one to report professional leave and Fran was the only one to report three days of emergency leave. Beth related that the secretaries in her district had just gained five paid holidays. However, the average number of paid leave days, other than sick leave days for the employee or a family member, for the five women with such benefits was 5.5 days. I discovered one quotation cited by Kemp and attributed to the research of Beechey and Perkins that summed up the problematic full-time/part-time employment status of school secretaries well, “Thus, part-time workers are a considerable bargain for companies to employ” (p. 189). Although public schools are not companies, they are often managed like businesses and the public school secretary is one of the most cost-effective employees in the school setting.

**Collective Bargaining Considerations**

Another problematic issue for school secretaries was access to collective bargaining. I included an item on the questionnaire that allowed the respondents to report whether they were represented by a collective bargaining group, and whether or not they belonged to such a group. Participation in a bargaining seemed directly related to school district size location. Secretaries working in rural districts were unable to participate because there were no opportunities. Only three of 50 questionnaire participants working in districts with enrollment populations under 1000 reported belonging to a bargaining group; and only eight of the 50 participants reported access to such a group. In larger districts, a greater number of secretaries were represented by collective bargaining groups. Thirty-nine of 65 were eligible for
membership in a bargaining group. Of the 18 secretaries I interviewed, 13 did not belong to bargaining units; and 12 of these secretaries did not have access to this opportunity. Of the five secretaries who belonged to bargaining groups, all worked in districts with district enrollments of 5000 students or more. In Table 3 I summarized years of service, hourly wage, and membership in collective bargaining groups.

**Table 3. Salary Information of the Interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Hourly Wage</th>
<th>Collective Bargaining</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.16</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.25</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9.59</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11.88</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10.75</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.58</td>
<td>Not a member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.62</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.37</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mona</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.56</td>
<td>No access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.86</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This information is an interesting array of inconsistencies, with the exception of access to bargaining groups. As the researcher, I know that many of the communities the secretaries reside in are located in rural Iowa. This is a primary limitation on building bargaining units because the number of building secretaries in a given school district is limited, often as few as three per district.

According to researchers, Splater-Roth, Hartmann, and Collins (1994), on a national basis, women in white-collar jobs, such as clerical workers, represented about a quarter of the women who belong to unions. However, this group appeared to be under-represented in unionization efforts even though 31 percent of the workers studied were assigned to the group, administrative support workers, also known as secretaries. The researchers described this group as, “relatively unorganized” (p. 11) and suggested they lacked the intensity to unionize that blue-collar workers displayed. However, the lack of access to a collective bargaining units was another observation made in the Splater-Roth (et al.) research. It was reported that only three percent of the women working in companies or firms with fewer than 25 employees belonged to bargaining groups (p. 9). Of the twelve secretaries who did not have access to a bargaining group, all of them worked in districts where the number of non-certified staff (all staff other than state certified teachers, counselors, or administrators) ranged from 12 to approximately 30. Grace shared observations on wages and lack of access to all support groups. As she related, “Given the facts: I live in a very small town with few job opportunities; I do not have to drive very far to get to work; I love my job; my hourly wage is not consumed by driving expenses; and I decided some time ago to continue in my current job” (Interview, December,
Grace went on the share that it did not make sense to leave her job, but she would value resources that would help her do a better job.

Five of the secretaries I interviewed were members of collective bargaining groups. Tara's discussion of her participation in the Service Employees International Union (SEUI) was interesting. She related how her starting pay had been $4.37 twenty years ago and now the salary schedule for secretaries included four groups and the lowest starting pay was $9.05. Tara's 2001-2002 pay rate was $12.59 and reflected her placement on the salary schedule ($11.07 base pay), longevity ($.25), educational credit ($1.15), and professional standards pay ($.12). She reported that the settlement the SEUI had reached with her school district had been very helpful and the organization had worked for the secretaries since the year 2000. One of the benefits reported is the $.12 professional standards pay. She reported that when secretaries belong to the National Association of Education Office Professionals they are eligible to work on certification related to professional standards designated by the organization. Members in her district are awarded this hourly pay increment to help pay for their participation in this certification process.

Sarah was also an active union member and discussed inequities in the negotiated agreement between the secretaries and teaching assistants, and other school employees. In her district the secretaries and teaching assistants do not have the same access to dental coverage as other employees and they also have to pay more out-of-pocket costs for insurance. She related that the union would be the way to address these inequitable policies.
Training and Support

I was curious to know how readily training was provided for the school secretaries in the state. Analysis of the questionnaire information revealed this area to be problematic statewide. Over 38 percent of all respondents reported that did not believe they had encouragement from employers to continue their training or education and 55 percent reported that time and reimbursement were not provided for training. On-going training, which has been considered critical for educators because of the remarkable increase in the use of technology, was overlooked for secretaries.

Members of the smaller focus group identified resources that had supplied them with useful information and practical training that was pertinent to the job. During my on-site visit Beth related how one of the local school districts had sponsored a workshop for the secretaries in the public schools in her county. She reminisced about the event and located the materials that had been provided to the participating secretaries. The focus of the event had been upgrading technology skills that were being universally utilized by public school secretaries. She also related that it had given the participants of the meeting a chance to share procedures and forms that made managing the office more efficient. It was one way to gain new knowledge about computer programs and the software that was available at the time. I noted that the material was over eight years old.

A prominent professional organization for school principals, School Administrators of Iowa (SAI), was praised by Jill as being an excellent source of information and training. She related how she made a point of going to the annual
Secretaries' Seminar every year. I contacted this organization's communication's director and asked for information about the 2002 meeting which was conducted in April. After I reviewed the title of the event, "Champions of Children" (SAI, 2002) and read the agenda of different presentations, I understood why Jill would enjoy going to this event. Topics included: violence in schools; limits and liability issues related to the dispensing of medications; legal issues related to custody issues; and being a champion for children, which was a discussion on best practices used by Iowa school secretaries.

A similar type of one-day training event was mentioned by Fran. She related that a few years ago she had attended a Secretaries' Day in-service at the main office of her school district's assigned Area Education Agency (AEA). She explained how she had gained a lot of valuable information and thought that the meeting was not as expensive as the meeting offered by SAI. She also related that she had not attended for a couple of years and was certain that the AEA had not sponsored a meeting for the 2000-2001 school year. When I contacted the specific AEA Fran mentioned, I talked with one of the secretaries who had previously helped with the planning of the school secretaries' in-service meetings. She explained that the secretaries at the AEA had actually been the people who had planned the meetings, but they had not been afforded the time or resources to continue the event and she did not believe there had been a secretaries' meeting for a few years. She expressed the idea that such meetings were probably very helpful, but there were no immediate plans to continue this service.
As I reflected on the responses and opinions provided by the respondents related to issues of wages, benefits, and training, I knew that the school secretaries would not be the group highest on the priority list during the 2002 fiscal crisis in public education. I think Fran summed the situation up for many school secretaries when she said, “I didn’t attend the SAI meeting — too expensive. I didn’t have the heart to ask for money or the time to go to it when we are struggling just to get supplies.”

There are two significant general conclusions that I have drawn from this study. The first is related to the high level of satisfaction secretaries garner from their jobs, even when there appears to be many drawbacks. The second is associated with the comprehensive array of duties that the school secretary performs. I believe both are related to the child-centered attitude these women bring into the work setting. The initial reason for working in schools is linked to their own children. The reason they stay in their jobs is related to helping the children of others.

Administrative teams in our schools should be openly acknowledging the interpersonal skills that the building secretary brings into the office. Researchers and educators like Casanova (1991) and Ediger (2001) wisely advise public school administrators to see the school secretary as an extraordinary asset. I will close this chapter with some advice given by school secretaries to anyone willing to assume a job like theirs. I believe they are voicing some sound strategies for success.
Advice from the Experts

Again, I turned to the secretaries that had shared so much of the time and expertise with me. I found their advice to be simple and direct. I was confident that they were speaking from the heart.

Nan: You need to love the children (she laughs). Your first goal would be, you have to be for the children, not the job, the clerical end of it. That's a small part of your job. If you're going into clerical work and you want computers and numbers and to put the data in perfectly, that's a very small part of my job (Interview, January 1, 2002).

Lilly: Patience, patience, patience, patience, patience (she laughs). And most of the time not with the kids (she laughs again). Adults just seem to be helpless sometimes. I think you need very, very strong people skills.

Tara: You've got to be pleasant, open-minded, you've got to put yourself in the position of a parent, and a student....you've got to be understanding with a student along the route and then you've got to be able to get along with people.

Sarah: To have a sense of humor. A lot of patience and not even consider it (the job) unless you're extremely organized. Otherwise, you'll just go out of your mind. I've been here nine years and two in-service days in nine years that gave me information about the computers.

Jill: The biggest thing is to be flexible because we're always having a crisis and you just have to learn to deal with them and like I would say, if it's a very high-stressed person, it's not the job for them.
The 1998 OECD report states that interpersonal skills are highly valued and are very important in service work. The report also relates that such skills are extremely difficult to define, are challenging to address in training, and are even more resistant to evaluation. Yet these skills are touched on repeatedly in the advice above. Perhaps this is why educational researchers have been reluctant to focus on school secretaries in their research. The school secretary represents so much more than the ability to answer the phone and run a copy machine. I believe it is time for the field of public education to acknowledge the needs of school secretaries; to face the problems the secretaries have identified; and to offer reasonable solutions that will improve working conditions and encourage these women to remain in our schools. In Chapter 6 I will call upon the public school principals to initiate change.
CHAPTER 6. DOES MS. KLEINHOPPER RUN THE SCHOOL?

“Researchers critique what seems natural, and spin images of what's possible, and engage in questions of how to move from here to there.”

Michelle Fine

During the interviews and observations with the focus group members, three topics were consistently addressed as concerns that required resolution. These included: high levels of responsibility that must periodically be assumed, whether the secretary was properly prepared or not; the need for some type of ongoing networking or support system specifically focused on the varying challenges of school secretaries; and issues related to wages and/or benefits. I asked the following interview question, “If you could improve your current working situation, what would you do?” and the focus group members stated:

Beth: I'd kinda like to see it be a longer term job. I think they could make use of me during the summer in some way.

Erin: I'd wish that we would get paid what we're worth. I have two years of college.

Fran: Unlimited financial means for the teachers, supplies, things like that. We don't even have a guidance counselor right now. I can't have a full time nurse because of the money.

Grace: I'd like a lunch program on the computer instead of selling tickets.

Jill: I would say, and I know this is impossible, but to have it so the nurse could be in our building more during the medicine times.

Kate: Maybe to be compensated for what my ability is worth. I've got two years of college.
The respondents' concerns coupled with my own uneasiness about the disregard the field of public education has shown for this group of public school employees helped me formulate recommendations. I approached the task by returning to the question posed by Stephen Barone in his April, 1994 commentary in *Education Week*, the very question that has provoked me for more than two years, "Does Ms. Kleinhopper really run the school?"

Yes, in many ways, she does. Ms. Kleinhopper and the school secretaries I worked with in this study are often cast into the role of running the school, not by choice, but by necessity. The result of this fluctuating responsibility has created unique challenges for school secretaries. I believe these challenges can best be addressed by school principals. The two entities share a history in public school organization and an intertwining of two roles: principal as building-manager and secretary as stand-in for the building manager. Additionally, building principals are assigned leadership roles in the hierarchy of the public school organization that endorse decision making related to human resources, scheduling, and allocation of funds. Thus, I focused on proactive measures that can be used to address concerns and institute change.

**The Building Principal: An Advocate for Change**

In Casanova's (1991) work on school secretaries, she reviewed the differentiating characteristics between "effective" principals and "typical" principals. She noted that the most effective principals implemented procedures and managed resources attentively. Effective principals also openly identified, "an efficient
secretary as one of their important assets" (p.18). They promoted utilization of the secretary to handle office routines, such as the dissemination of information and standard policy procedures, and readily realized that the secretary contributed to the principal's success. This viewpoint reinforced my recommendation that the building principal is the most logical advocate for the school secretary. Hanson (2001) and Ediger (2001) both noted the need to include the school secretary in organizational change. Hanson advised that all members of the school organization must be informed of or included in the process of organizational change.

Quint (1994) discussed the school principal as a transformational leader. She cited the ideas on leadership and vision proposed by Sergiovanni as instrumental in identifying the qualities of strong school leaders. I found that Sergiovanni (1992) embraced an expanded view of leadership that, "may require us to reinvent the concept of leadership itself" (p. xiii). It occurred to me that if the voices of secretaries were going to matter, then the voices of secretaries needed to be heard by educators. Again, I reflected on the stories I had heard from the research respondents and noted the strong connection with the building administrators. The principal can openly acknowledge the stand-in role the secretary must often assume whenever the principal leaves the building, a common occurrence cited in Chapter 4. Thus, the building principal can take measures to provide various means of support. For the secretary such measures would address communication within the building, provisions for necessary training, and scheduling and compensation proposals that reduce inequities.
**Principals Provide Building-level Support**

Not all support offered to the secretary needs to in the form of training or in service education related to clerical tasks. The first level of support should take place at the building-level and is interpersonal in nature. The principal should insure that all educators and support staff realize that when she or he leaves the building to assume other administrative duties, attend meetings, or because of personal reasons, the secretary will be left in charge of the management of the office. The duties that this encompasses should be clearly identified by the administrator so that others realize the secretary is implementing the schools district’s and/or principal’s procedures and policies, not her own.

Jill’s situation was very typical of the secretaries in the school districts represented by the focus group. The principal Jill currently works with must assume other leadership roles for the district, such as curriculum coordinator, and is out of her office about 30 percent of the time. Jill has been assigned numerous decision-making tasks and like other secretaries described, the ones related to the management of teachers, such as making sure classes are covered if teachers leave the building, are disconcerting. As she stated: “I’m very uncomfortable with figuring out how to cover classes, which teachers to use. Not all of them appreciate it when I have to ask them” (Interview, February 3, 2002). Beth’s role as stand-in for the principal was accepted as part of routine business in her school because the building principal was also the school district’s athletic director and for much of the school year he had to leave every afternoon prior to the dismissal of school. Beth
related how the teachers often wanted to talk with the principal after school and since he was not there they would talk with her. They would also make requests for leave and she expressed how uncomfortable she felt giving directives to teachers regarding policies or procedures related to leaving the building and time off. In both situations improving basic communication between the principal and teaching staff could curtail such problems.

Communication is one of the most basic and critical components of successful management available to school administrators. By clearly communicating the extent to which the building secretary is responsible for the management of the office/school during the absence of the principal, the secretary can work more comfortably. The teaching staff and other members of the non-certified staff will also recognize the types of requests that can be addressed by the secretary and thus, support her in the decisions that she may make in the principal's absence. According to Castetter and Young (2000), school systems cannot operate effectively, even for short periods of time, without sharing information about the people who are going and coming on a daily basis. They stated, "School systems are constantly confronted with information-communication problems centering on such matters as keeping abreast of the need for information, both in quantity and in quality . . ." (p.81). Arcaro (1995) addressed the importance of effective communications and stressed the need for leaders to share information with all members of the education staff. In Conley's (1996) work on restructuring schools, he specifically addressed the role of the building principal as being the key facilitator responsible for keeping all members of the educational staff informed. He stated,
“Principals also provide information about how the school functions internally, how money is allocated, what resources are available, and how operational decisions are made” (pp. 84-85). However, I believe Grace summed up the need for effective communication as well as any of the experts when she stated:

I’ve thought about that [communication in the school] and it’s really tough. I would like for everyone to have a better understanding of other employees’ jobs. If you’re a teacher, try to understand where I’m coming from. I need to understand where the maintenance people are coming from. I think we all need a greater understanding of each other and what everyone deals with, not just a certain aspect of administration or teaching staff. Not just our own little area. (Interview, February 3, 2002)

This is one of many examples of the voice of reason offered by the respondents.

Principals Facilitate Networking and Training Opportunities

In Chapter 5 I referred to the annual secretaries’ seminar sponsored by the professional organization for public school principals, School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) and similar meetings that had been conducted by one of the Area Education Agency (AEA) offices. Both activities were reported to be worthwhile events that helped provide useful information to secretaries and the opportunity to meet and talk with other school secretaries from across the state. However, the opportunity to meet with peers to share knowledge and information was not a routine for many secretaries. With the exception of Jill, none of the other secretaries attended the SAI’s annual meeting. Grace explained that she had never been invited
to attend an SAI seminar, but did express an interest in attending a regional meeting if something became available.

I found her response, "I have never been invited to an SAI meeting," provoking and wondered whose responsibility it was to arrange to attend the seminar. I contacted SAI's office again and asked for more information. SAI's communications director reported:

Planning for the secretaries workshop occurs with input from a variety of sources. We review the seminar evaluations each year for any suggestions that the secretaries may have. The SAI staff also makes note of issues which impact secretaries that are raised throughout the year. We also ask administrators what information would be valuable for their secretaries to have. . . . I discussed the networking opportunities for secretaries. SAI is always open to the support of any group that works with school children.

(Harms, 2002)

The cost of the one-day meeting was reported to be $70, which included lunch. In view of the 2002 agenda mentioned earlier, this would seem like a sound investment. The seminar offered legal advice, medical advice, and useful strategies for dealing with custody issues, hostile parents, police officers and violence in the school setting. The stand-in for the principal should be as well-informed as possible.

Erin, Beth, Fran and Kate each expressed the idea that training or networking opportunities closer to their school districts would be welcomed. I used Fran's story about the training service provided by the Area Education Agency (AEA) in her region as a springboard, and canvassed ten of the fifteen AEAs in Iowa, calling on
that particular AEA first. Unfortunately, I discovered that the agency no longer provided this service to the secretaries in the area. The woman I spoke with had helped with the meetings, and informed me that it had been the AEA secretaries who had coordinated the event all along, knowing that the secretaries in the public schools needed to be kept informed about many issues. She also informed me that resources or support for the endeavor was currently not being provided and the AEA hadn’t offered the event for three or four years.

This was the first of many similar phone conversations. I contacted the AEA offices of the 18 interviewees and found only one AEA that offered networking, training and an annual seminar to the public school secretaries in the surrounding region. This AEA has an April meeting each year, contiguous with “Secretary’s Day” and the agency has also provided professional development opportunities throughout the school year. The coordinator of these services informed me that workshops on computer applications and software, effective communication with the public, and working with parents were topics that had been covered. She shared the agenda for the 2002 workshop and these were very similar to the topics covered by the SAI seminar and included: confidentiality of student records; reporting student achievement clearly to the public; dealing with distress calls; copyright laws; wellness issues; and developing effective listening skills. I congratulated this woman and her staff and explained that this AEA may be the only one in the state that is providing networking and training to public school secretaries. She was very pleased to hear this and expressed her concern for the future of the program, as many school administrators had informed the AEA that they would not be sending any staff
out-of-district for training during the 2002-2003 school year. She jokingly asked, "Would you mind letting some people here know what you are finding and how important this is?"

Again, I recommend that the principals in the public schools of Iowa meet the challenge to secure the necessary training and support needed for the secretaries in their schools. Principals should take an instrumental role in identifying and coordinating the resources that are available statewide. This process should start by recognizing the need for supportive networks and training resources; may include the institution of resources on a regional basis; or extending the call for a reinstitution of past practices that offered training and support on a regional basis. As the communications director for SAI pointed out, school administrators have extensive input in the preparation of the support for secretaries, the job of connecting resources with staff is in their hands.

*Principals Support Fair Compensation and Benefits*

As the direct supervisor of the school secretary, the principal has been assigned the tasks of evaluating, monitoring, and planning the secretaries work load. Marshall and Mitchell (1991) analyzed the rights and responsibilities of school site administrators and determined that principals are implementers of district policies and are responsible for efficiently fulfilling district goals and mandates. The authors reported that the input principals have in policy-making may be limited at times, but principals are still afforded high levels of responsibility. As Marshall and Mitchell stated, "They are expected, however, to implement district policy and to remain within the budgets allotted by the district" (p. 399). This close link to the planning and
implementing of district budgets has allowed principals the opportunity to address the compensation and benefits awarded to school secretaries.

In support of what would be considered site-based management, English (1994) advised administrators to consider the research of early pioneers in various realms of management, including education. He referred to the work of Mary Parker Follett, who had developed ideas of management that included what has been termed, the law of the situation. English reported, “Follett saw that authority was not solely determined by the administrative hierarchy, but by the situation itself, and by the person who could exercise competence and leadership in that situation” (p.119). The underlying premise was that individuals, especially women, are not always motivated by personal gain, but by doing what is best for the group or organization. With this in mind, I recommend that school principals take the initiative to make proposals that might alter the current work routines for some school secretaries.

During my interviews and on-site visits I talked with the focus group members about changes that would be beneficial for all school secretaries. Other interviewees had related concerns associated with length of the contract year, hourly pay versus contracted salary, paid/ unpaid vacation, and insurance benefits. One reality that was shared by many of the total 18 interviewees and common to all of the focus group participants was the fact that when school was not in session, they were not earning wages. All members of the focus group had sick leave benefits that seemed to parallel the standards set by the Iowa Public Employees Relations Board (PERB), the agency that oversees the collective bargaining procedures of state employees. However, none of the focus group had access to membership in a collective
bargaining unit, thus there were some variations in all benefits. When teachers leave for Christmas/winter break, spring break, days following conference week, and summer break they are compensated through their negotiated contracts and pay is divided into twelve month increments. Secretaries may miss as many as 18 days of pay during the school year and are not reimbursed for time off in the summer. The option of having pay extended over twelve months was not reported unless the secretary worked year-round and none of the focus group were included in this group.

I believe the issues related to wages and reimbursement schedules should be the starting point for principal advocacy outside of the local school district. This could be facilitated by SAI and the Iowa Association of School Boards. However, what is needed is support for change and this support can be generated from the building principals throughout the state. Statewide guidelines could be established relative to these issues without taking decision making away from local districts. An example of restructuring the calendar year to allow secretaries to work during holiday closings would add to their salary and would also give them the time needed to complete many of the tasks that get reprioritized on hectic days in the office. This would be a genuine gesture of support and an acknowledgement of the importance the secretary's role in the school organization. To enable the principal to work for change, moving outside the school building to the district and state levels appears essential.
Reflecting on the Research Process

The research process can be considered demanding and frustrating. I certainly viewed some elements of this research process as demanding: the hundreds of pieces of data that warranted consideration; the desire to follow research strategies that placed the welfare of the interview respondents before mine; and the sharing of ideas and documents in an effort to engage respondents in the research process so that they could "gain from" and not only "give to" this endeavor. My greatest frustration was the decades of indifference attached to the topic of school secretaries by the education community, more specifically, the leadership segment of the education community. However, the demands of the process brought rewards, and for every moment of frustration there were multiple moments of learning and enjoyment.

Changes for the Researcher

"Become the change you wish to see in others," is a quotation attributed to Gandhi. I post a copy of this quotation in my classroom. I find that it helps me reflect on my teaching practices, my professional development, and my future career aspirations. Through the process of completing this research I now realize that if I want to facilitate change for the group of women I have studied, I must also be willing to take on-going and active role in the change process. I consider joining the ranks of public school administrators as an option that would enable me to promote the recommendations listed in this project. Such a career move would enable me to become a member of the School Administrators of Iowa, a group that could truly facilitate change on behalf of school secretaries. I took time to review an exercise I
completed as a component of my preliminary examination. In that document I attribute the extensive course work I have completed as the key for my future success in public education. I do not discount all those learning experiences; however, I do know that my research on school secretaries has been much more influential in motivating me to secure my administrator's license than any of the courses I completed. Learning from these remarkable women has prepared me to enter into the role of principal with a better understanding of how the role they play in invaluable to the novice principal. I realize that they have a great deal to offer the principal and I respect them for their willingness to share their experience.

One of the elements of feminist qualitative research that has significantly changed how I think was discovering that it was acceptable to openly acknowledge various forms of bias in the research process. The feminist qualitative researcher must readily admit that there are attitudes and experiences carried into the research process that color perception and prevent what classical research scientists refer to as objectivity. Much of the battling between qualitative and quantitative researchers has centered on the concept of objectivity. Did I bring researcher bias into this research endeavor? Most certainly, the answer is yes. There are many forms of my bias.

After I reflected on my own educational and career experiences I had to admit that secretaries have been a part of my life for decades. In fact, in 1974 my father married one of the secretaries who worked where I was teaching! I traced my interaction with school secretaries back to 1956, the year I was in the first grade and could eat lunch at school. I remembered our secretary, "Bonnie", with great
fondness. She was so friendly and kind. When I had to go to the office with lunch money she was always there. I cannot recall seeing the principal very often, and I did know him, as he was one of my father's friends. I truly believe the children in the building thought "Bonnie" ran the school. I recalled that I did.

Recently I spoke with my sister about "Bonnie", because my sister lives in the community where we had been raised. She told me that "Bonnie" had worked in the new elementary school my niece had attended and that she had continued working until 1996. It amazed me to think that her career as a school secretary spanned at least 40 years. However, after participating in this research project, I was not surprised. "Bonnie" was another example of a dedicated public school secretary who played multiple roles as the curator of the school's history, a helper to young children, and as a stand-in for her boss.

In my current teaching position I know very well who the most dependable curator of the school is. She has been there longer than all of the teachers, except one; she has weathered the transition between old and new administrators at least seven times in the last ten years; she can fix every copy machine in the building; she can tell the difference between generic and real Ritalin; and she has a smile or kind word for everyone she sees. She reminds me of many school secretaries I have worked with over the past year.

Changes for the research respondents

Engaging in this research project has provided me with much more than an opportunity to reminisce. I have practiced a process which I hope to employ in the
future. I have learned that collecting and organizing research data is labor intensive, time consuming, and very interesting. I have gained more confidence in analyzing and interpreting information. Armed with the final research product, this document, I will be prepared to move forward in my career and use my education to promote the recommendations elicited by the women I have been working with over the past year. Knowing that I had been changed through the research experience, I wondered if any of the secretaries had experienced a sense of change because of their participation in the project.

I had mailed each of the eighteen interviewees copies of their transcripted interviews hoping to receive comments about the project. I received a couple of e-mail responses thanking me and one from a person who expressed some dismay concerning the number of times she said, “Um,” in her transcript. I reassured her that I would not include many of these thoughtful pauses in the final document. I hoped for more feedback from the group and once again turned to the small group to hear what they thought about the research process. My final e-mail included a question that focused on the idea of change. I asked, *Has participation in the research project affected you in any way?* Here are some of the replies from the focus group:

Grace: Yes. I have been more aware of my surroundings, duties, feelings about my position and what I would like to see changed. I feel you have covered the ‘secretary’ position very well and struck on some very real issues I have with administrators, the public, board, certified staff etc. Thanks.

Fran: I feel than I am not the only school secretary around and
that many of us have the same problems/complaints. None of us really get to talk to each other. I don't even get to talk to the school secretaries at the other building (high school). There are three there and they just kind of have their own group and help each other out but I am a loner.

I think maybe I feel that I really am an important person and not just a body in the office. I think you did a great job in your interviewing. I feel fortunate to be one of the 'interview participants because it was definitely the boost I needed this year. I know that it wasn't much in the eyes of many, but when you are used to no one asking your opinion or thoughts, ...... it was definitely a boost in my emotional and professional ego. Will be looking forward to reading your 'novel' :)

Erin: Pam, you did a nice job. Thank you for caring.

I received Kate's response last and it had the greatest impact on me. After all of her years in public education she was finally leaving. I'm not convinced this was totally her choice, as she wrote:

Dear Pam,
They are laying off and cutting back on staff at _____ next year, no money, and they combined my position with the middle school secretary position. I don't think anyone can do justice to two jobs and I don't want to try, so I am retiring the end of May. I would like a copy of anything you come up with as a final summary, but don't want to go to any meetings. I won't have e-mail after May 30.

Kate
I did not receive a reply from Beth. This was somewhat puzzling to me. She had shared many perceptions and insights with me, and had suggested the idea of smaller county-based or regional meetings for school secretaries. Her absent voice and Kate's retirement saddened me. I wanted to hear more from all of these women. I was pleased that they thought I had done a good job relative to the research process, but I viewed this as a secondary consideration on my part. I wanted them to use the process as a platform to promote their voice. Munro (1998) described what I had been striving for in my research relationships. She stated, "The informant is not a passive, objectified function of data, nor the insider on whom the researcher is dependent for insight. Both the researcher and the researched are active participants in the research relationship" (p. 126). However, Munro also went on to share her struggles with collaborative activities in the research process, and related, "My heightened sensitivity to avoiding an exploitative research relationship had not taken into account the fact that my participants had their own reasons and agendas for participating in the study . . . and would develop their own framing of our relationship" (p. 127). Instead of being sad, I decided that I would become more determined to share the information and recommendations we had produced together.

I want to end this document with the voices of the "women in the principal's office" as Ursula Casanova referred to them in her book. The purpose of this project was to find those voices and I think it is fitting that they have the last say.

Ram: What would you like the public to realize about the role of the school secretary?
Beth: Probably a lot [of people] don't realize all the things that we do during a day. Probably a lot think we're just there to answer the phone or take care of the lunch accounts.

Erin: We try to keep everybody happy. Society has changed a lot. I don't think parents back the system like they used to. If I have a discipline problem with a student, it's my problem. I'm the one with the problem, not the student.

Fran: I think I would like the public [parents] to know that they need to remember that maybe they only have one, two, or three children to watch out for, whereas I have 300.

Grace: We are a minor enforcer. We don't make the rules. We don't have anything to do with making rules. We're here for the benefit of your child. If we call and tell you that Johnny didn't show up for school, don't yell at us and say it's none of our business. We need for you to know he's not at school, so that he's not in a ditch somewhere or that he's not taken off. Work with us.

Jill: That it's not just answering the phone. That's not what I do. I just wish they would see it's not as easy as they think.

Kate: Well, I think it is a respected position.

Well, Kate, hopefully, it is.
APPENDIX A. LETTER OF INTRODUCTION
Dear Public School Secretary:

Hello. My name is Pam Nystrom and I am a teacher in Boone, IA. I have been working on my Ph.D. in education, studying a wide variety of topics pertinent to public schooling in America. I have noted a huge gap in research on the role of the public school secretary. After more than twenty years in the classroom, I know what an important role school secretaries play in the successful operation of a school and I would like to research this topic. I also believe that the secretary’s voice is missing from the information base pertaining to effective schools and I would like to give you an opportunity to express your perceptions about your job.

I appreciate how busy you are at this time of the school year, but I am asking for your help. I would greatly appreciate your completion of the enclosed questionnaire. A wonderful group of school secretaries has reviewed the survey for me and completion takes approximately 10 minutes. The purposes of the survey are to gather general information about the school secretaries in the state of Iowa and to identify secretaries willing to participate in more in-depth interviews and discussion groups at a later date.

To maintain your privacy, I have addressed this mailing to “The School Secretary” at each specific school. If you are interested in participating in an initial telephone interview, please return the enclosed short form with the questionnaire.

Thank you very much for participating. Your role in the public school setting is valuable and your perceptions should be included in the vast amount of information currently being gathered on public schools in America.

Sincerely,

Pam Nystrom
1827 Boone St.
Boone, IA 50036
pscn@willinet.net
APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE
Public School Secretary's Questionnaire

Directions: Please complete these survey questions/rating scales and return the form in the enclosed, postage-paid envelope as soon as possible. Thank you!
(If you know of someone else who would be interested in responding, please copy and share these forms)

Personal Information: Check or complete all that describe you.

Female ______  Male: ______  Age: ______

Level of Education:  ___ High school/GED
                   ___ Secretarial training
                   ___ Other Clerical training
                   ___ Secretarial/Clerical degree
                   ___ Bachelor degree/Major ________________________
                   ___ Graduate training/Emphasis ______________________
                   ___ Graduate degree/Major ________________________
                   ___ Other (Please describe) ________________________

Building assignment:
                   ___ elementary school  ___ middle school/Jr. High
                   ___ high school      ___ central office staff
                   ___ other (Please describe) ________________________

Is your building principal female or male? ___ female  ___ male

Does your principal serve more than one building? ___ Yes  ___ No

Do you work for more than one principal? ___ Yes  ___ No

Status of position:
                   ___ full time / ___ hours per week
                   ___ part time / ___ hours per week

Duration of employment at this job: _______ years

Duration of employment in this school district if different from above: _______ years

Other comments: _____________________________________________

Current hourly salary: ____________

Other benefits:
                   ___ health insurance paid by the district (pbd) ___ dental (pbd)
                   ___ temporary disability (pbd) ___ life insurance (pbd) ___ sick leave
                   (number of days/year ______)
                   ___ other paid leave (Please describe) ________________________

Are secretaries in your district represented by a collective bargaining group? ___ Yes  ___ No

Do you belong to such a group? ___ Yes  ___ No

(OVER)
Duties of Assignment: Please check the following duties that describe your job.

___ word processing for the principal
___ answering the phone
___ recording phone messages
___ teachers
___ using the P.A. system
___ reporting phone messages
___ other computer work (Describe: ___________)
___ processing orders for supplies
___ working the front desk
___ greeting/meeting visitors
___ making appointments for the principal
___ sending fax messages
___ sending memos by e-mail
___ monitoring students
___ managing lunch count
___ managing lunch ticket sales
___ arranging use of facilities
___ dispensing medications
___ preparing newsletters
___ arranging meetings
___ preparing special reports (Examples: ____________________________)
___ other duties for the principal (Please describe: ____________________________)
___ other duties for the school (Please describe: ____________________________)

Please feel free to describe any other duties.____________________________________

Job Perceptions/Job Satisfaction: Please circle a number to rate the following statements. [5=strongly agree; 4=agree; 3=neutral; 2=somewhat disagree; and 1=disagree]

I took my current job because I wanted to work in a school. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I took my current job because I needed employment and it was available. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I was trained for the tasks of this job prior to taking the position. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I was provided with necessary training after assuming this job. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I have been encouraged by my employers to continue training and education. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I have been provided time/payment to continue training and education. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I have expertise which allows me to fulfill my duties with success. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I am frustrated by the duties of this job because of lack of training/other reasons. (Please describe _____________________________.) 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I work well with the principal in this building. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I work well with the teachers and other staff members in this building. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I feel appreciated by the principal. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I feel appreciated by other members of the staff. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I like my job and plan to stay in this assignment. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1
I am seeking other employment. 5.....4.....3.....2.....1

(THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE! IF YOU WANT TO TALK, FILL OUT THE HALF SHEET.)
APPENDIX C. BOOKMARK
What does the word, "Secretary" mean?

So very...
energetic,
caring,
responsible,
encouraging,
trustworthy,
all-knowing,
reliable...
your school's best friend.

You deserve a special THANKS
Pam Nystrom, 2001
I am willing to participate in a more in-depth interview. You may contact me by using the following information:

Name:____________________________________

Address:__________________________________

Phone:________________________

E-mail:________________________
APPENDIX E. HUMAN SUBJECTS INFORMATION
Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purposes of this project are:

1. to satisfy the requirements of research for the dissertation component of my doctoral program
2. to gain an understanding of your experiences as a public school secretary
3. to analyze the role of the school secretary within the organizational context of public schools and the history of American clerical workers

As a participant in this case study, you will be asked to participate in an initial telephone interview, which will be followed by e-mail correspondence if you so agree. Participation in more in depth interviews may follow, again if you so agree. The information gained from the interviews and correspondence will be used as the data for analytical and theoretical review. Specific themes and anecdotal information generated by participants will be the major focus of the study.

Participant Assurances:

1. Real names and other identifying information that could reveal location, job assignment, or facilitate personal identification will not be recorded in interviews, data analysis, nor in the written document. Pseudonyms will be used whenever necessary. However, because of these safeguards, personal anecdotes and direct quotes may be included in the written document.

2. The participant has the right to withdraw at any time from the study, for any reason, and the data pertinent to the individual participant will be returned upon request.

3. The participant may review written portions of the study that include the information provided by said participant prior to the completion of the final draft.

4. Two in depth one-on-one interviews will be recorded by the researcher and transcribed by a third party.

5. Questions related to the research process and the methods used by the researcher are welcomed.

6. The information obtained during this study will be used to complete the dissertation component of the researcher’s doctoral program. The study will be read by the researcher’s doctoral committee, other faculty at Iowa State University, and participants interested in doing so. Copies of the finished document will be housed at Iowa State University where they will be available at the library, most likely on microfiche and with the author. Other forms of the written document may be published by the author.

7. Results of the study may be shared with other public school organizations as requested.

If you agree to participate in this research study according to the preceding terms, please sign below:

Participant:_________________________________________*

Date:_____________________________________________

Active participation may extend to 5-1-03, approximately one year following the completion of the final dissertation draft.

Researcher:  Pamela S. Nystrom
             1827 Boone St.
             Boone, IA  50036
             515-432-7597

Major Professor:  Dr. Leslie R. Bloom
                 515-294-3498

*A copy will be returned to the participant.
Confidentiality Pledge

As the transcribing secretary working with the recorded data of the research project being completed by Pamela S. Nystrom on public school secretaries, I understand the assurances of the respondents' consent form. These include:

1. Real names and other identifying information that could reveal location, job assignment, or facilitate personal identification will not be recorded in interviews, data analysis, nor in the written document. Pseudonyms will be used whenever necessary. However, because of these safe guards, personal anecdotes and direct quotes may be included in the written document.

2. The participant has the right to withdraw at any time from the study, for any reason, and the data pertinent to the individual participant will be returned upon request.

3. The participant may review written portions of the study that include the information provided by said participant prior to the completion of the final draft.

4. Two in depth one-on-one interviews will be recorded by the researcher and transcribed by a third party.

I pledge to honor these assurances and guard the identity and privacy of the participants throughout the research process. I pledge to keep information confidential and to discuss data only with Pamela S. Nystrom.

Signed: [Signature]
Date: 11/16/01
DATE: November 16, 2001

TO: Pamela Nystrom

FROM: Janell Meldrem, IRB Administrator

RE: “Public School Secretaries” IRB ID 02-166

TYPE OF APPLICATION: ☑ New Project   □ Continuing Review   □ Modification

The project, “Public School Secretaries” has been approved for one year from its IRB approval date November 16, 2001. University policy and Federal regulations (45 CFR 46) require that all research involving human subjects be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on a continuing basis at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but at least once per year.

Any modification of this research project must be submitted to the IRB for prior review and approval. Modifications include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or sponsors (funding sources), including additional key personnel, changing the Informed Consent Document, an increase in the total number of subjects anticipated, or adding new materials (e.g., letters, advertisements, questionnaires).

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

The PI must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity. If the principal investigator terminates association with the University before that time, the signed informed consent documents should go to the DEO to be maintained.

You are expected to make sure that additional key personnel who are involved in human subjects research complete training prior to their interactions with human subjects. Web based training is available from our web site.

Eleven months from the IRB approval, you will receive a letter notifying you that the expiration date is approaching. At that time, you will need to fill out a Continuing Review/and or Modification Form and return it to the Human Subjects Research Office. If the project is, or will be finished in one year, you will need to fill out a Project Closure Form to officially end the project.

Both of these forms are on the Human Subjects Research Office web site at: http://grants-svr.admin.iastate.edu/VPR/humansubjects.html.
Iowa State University
Human Subjects Review Form
(Please type and use the attached instructions for completing this form)

1. Title of Project: Dissertation Research—Public School Secretaries

2. I agree to provide the proper surveillance of this project to insure that the rights and welfare of the human subjects are protected. I will report any adverse reactions to the committee. Additions to or changes in research procedures after the project has been approved will be submitted to the committee for review. I agree that all key personnel involved in conducting human subjects research will receive training in the protection of human subjects. I agree to request renewal of approval for any project continuing more than one year.

Pamela S. Nystrom 10-1-01
Typed name of principal investigator Date Signature of principal investigator

Curriculum and Instruction
Department
Campus Address

Phone number and email: 515-432-7597
pscn@willinet.com

2a. Principal investigator

☐ Faculty  ☐ Staff  ☐ Postdoctoral  ☐ Graduate Student  ☐ Undergraduate Student

Typed name of co-principal investigator(s) Date Signature of co-principal investigator(s)

3a. Co-Principal investigator(s) (check all that apply)

☐ Faculty  ☐ Staff  ☐ Postdoctoral  ☐ Graduate Student  ☐ Undergraduate Student

Typed name of major professor or supervisor (if not a co-principal investigator) Date Signature of major professor or supervising faculty member

Dr. Leslie R. Bloom

4. Typed names of other key personnel who will directly interact with human subjects.

5. Project (check all that apply)

☐ Research  ☒ Thesis or dissertation  ☐ Class project  ☐ Independent Study (490, 590, Honors project)

6. Number of subjects (complete all that apply)

21-2 adults, non-students  ☐ # ISU students  ☐ minors under 14  ☐ # other (explain)

☐ = minors 14-17

7. Status of project submission through Office of Sponsored Programs Administration (check one)

☐ Has been submitted  ☐ Will be submitted  ☑ Will not be submitted

7a. Funding Source: N.A.

8. Brief description of proposed research involving human subjects: (See instructions, item 8. Use an additional page if needed.) (Include one copy of the complete proposal if submitting to a Federal sponsor.)
8. In the history of public education, and particularly in the history of the organizational structure of public schools pertinent to school principals, the school secretary has been an integrated member of the staff. However, very little research has been completed that analyzes the role of the school secretary. Additionally, it has been noted that there is no body of research that has garnered the perceptions and voices of these public school employees. The singular study that focused on elementary school secretaries that was completed in 1989 by Ursula Casanova included interviews with six elementary school secretaries and their principals. However, this project provided a dual focus and stressed the perceptions of the principals more than it did the secretaries. Ms. Casanova opened the door for future investigation of the school secretary's role in public education by posing some thought provoking questions, but no one has come forward to continue what she began.

The purpose of this research study is to uncover the perceptions of public school secretaries by offering them an opportunity to voice their perceptions, knowledge and concerns pertaining to their roles in public education. Analysis of data will include the effects current societal norms and public school organizational systems have on the jobs these employees do. I will also investigate the missing history of these workers as it applies to organizational structures of schools.

I will randomly select participants from the public schools of Iowa. I will ask that these secretaries participate in surveys, e-mail correspondence, telephone and one-on-one in depth interviews. Age and sex are not conditions of participation. However, student enrollment in public school districts varies a great deal and is a variable for consideration. Representatives from the smallest to the largest districts will be recruited. Demographic information will be gathered, but will not be the primary focus of data collection.

The primary focus of data collection and analysis will be the interview responses and the personal narratives garnered through writing activities and interviews. Although preliminary questions have been written by the researcher, many of the themes and topics for data collection are expected to be emergent and generated by the participants themselves.
9. Informed Consent:  ✓ Signed informed consent will be obtained. (Attach a copy of your form.)
   □ Modified informed consent will be obtained. (See instructions, item 9.)

10. Confidentiality of Data: Describe below the methods you will use to ensure the confidentiality of data obtained. (See instructions, item 10.)

   All participants engaged in the interview processes will be afforded safeguards to protect their identities. This will include: the use of pseudonyms; the masking of contextual clues that could identify address, work assignment, or school district; distinguishing features of personal appearance; and the names of other individuals discussed in the interviews. The transcription secretary will have access to data and will be informed of confidentiality issues.

11. Will subjects in the research be placed at risk or incur discomfort? Describe any risks to the subjects and precautions that will be taken to minimize them. (The concept of risk goes beyond physical risk and includes risks to subjects’ dignity and self-respect as well as psychological or emotional risk. See instructions, item 11.)

   Although subjects will not be exposed to medical risk or discomfort, the possible risk for identification of individuals could be present. This could cause embarrassment or other feelings of discomfort. To avoid this, respondents will be given the opportunity to read their personal transcripts prior to the final draft of the written document. Respondents will also be encouraged to ask questions, give feedback and request that statements be "off-the-record" and thus, not part of the data used for interpretation.

   □ A. Medical clearance necessary before subjects can participate
   □ B. Administration of substances (foods, drugs, etc.) to subjects
   □ C. Physical exercise or conditioning for subjects
   □ D. Samples (blood, tissue, etc.) from subjects
   □ E. Administration of infectious agents or recombinant DNA
   □ F. Application of external stimuli
   □ G. Application of noxious or potentially noxious stimuli
   □ H. Deception of subjects
   □ I. Subjects under 14 years of age and/or
   □ J. Subjects 14-17 years of age
   □ K. Pregnant women
   □ L. Research must be approved by another institution or agency (attach letters of approval)

   If you checked any of the items in 12, please complete the following in the space below (include any attachments):

   Items A-G Describe the procedures and note the proposed safety precautions.

   Items D-E The principal investigator should send a copy of this form to Environmental Health and Safety, 118 Agronomy Lab for review.

   Item H Describe how subjects will be deceived; justify the deception; indicate the debriefing procedure, including the timing and information to be presented to subjects.

   Item I For subjects under the age of 14, indicate how informed consent will be obtained from parents or legally authorized representatives as well as from subjects.

   Items J-K Explain what actions would be taken to insure minimal risk.

   Item L Specify the agency or institution that must approve the project. If subjects in any outside agency or institution are involved, approval must be obtained prior to beginning the research, and the letter of approval should be filed.
Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Form

PI Last Name __ Title of Project

Checklist for Attachments
The following are attached (please check):

13. □ Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
   a) the purpose of the research
   b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 18)
   c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
   d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
   e) how you will ensure confidentiality
   f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
   g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject

14. √ A copy of the consent form (if applicable)

15. □ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

16. √ Data-gathering instruments

17. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:
   First contact 11-15-01
   Last contact 2-28-02
   Month/Day/Year

18. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:
   Month/Day/Year

19. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer
   Date
   Department or Administrative Unit
   College of Education
   Date

20. Initial action by the Institutional Review Board (IRB):
   □ Project approved □ Pending Further Review □ Project not approved
   Date
   Date
   Date

21. Follow-up action by the IRB:
   Project approved □ Project not approved □ Project not resubmitted
   Date
   Date
   Date

Patricia M. Keith
Name of IRB Chairperson
Signature of IRB Chairperson
Approval Date
Iowa State University Human Subjects Review Form

PI Last Name: Nystrom  
Title of Project: Public School

Checklist for Attachments

The following are attached (please check):

13. ☐ Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:
   a) the purpose of the research
   b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 18)
   c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
   d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
   e) how you will ensure confidentiality
   f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
   g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject

14. ☑ A copy of the consent form (if applicable)

15. ☐ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

16. ☑ Data-gathering instruments

17. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:
   First contact: 11/15/01
   Last contact: 2/28/02

18. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:
   Month/Day/Year

19. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer
   Date: 1/3/01
   Department or Administrative Unit
   College of Education: Dept. of Curriculum and Instruction

20. Initial action by the Institutional Review Board (IRB):
   ☐ Project approved  ☑ Pending Further Review 1/15/01
   □ No action required
   Date

21. Follow-up action by the IRB:
   Project approved  □
   Project not approved 1/15/01
   Project not resubmitted 1/15/01

Name of IRB Chairperson
Signature of IRB Chairperson
Approval Date
APPENDIX F. FIRST TELEPHONE INTERVIEW
Interview Questions for Public School Secretaries

1. Why did you want a job as a school secretary?
2. Are there other jobs you've held or preferred?
3. What do you find gratifying about this position?
4. What are some of the frustrations of this position?
5. How would you explain your relationship with the principal?
6. How would you explain your relationship with teachers?
7. How would you explain your relationship with other support staff?
8. How do you interact with students?
9. How do you interact with parents?
10. What is your role like when the principal is in the building?
11. How does your role change when the principal is out of the building?
12. How does the role of secretary impact on the operation of your school?
13. What advice would you give someone who would be assuming a job like yours?
14. How would you improve your current working situation?
15. What would you like the public to realize about the role of the school secretary?
APPENDIX G. SECOND TELEPHONE INTERVIEW
Responses to the first round of questions have been analyzed and I thank you for your input. The process has been very interesting. Now it is my job to start focusing on common themes.

Many of you share common experiences, attitudes and concerns. You have related a wide variety of things you find gratifying. Some include your love for children; the high level of responsibility and respect associated with your job; the day-to-day variety of experiences; enjoyment of the education setting and the people you work with.

Some of the more frustrating aspects of the job have been associated with time and money issues. Some of these issues are personal and some are related to the money constraints that are facing your school districts.

Five themes that I would like to expand include:

1. Children
2. Helping others
3. Communication
4. Principals
5. "Shared Leadership" and decision making
6. Wages

Please think about the following questions/statements and I will be contacting you to set up our next interviews this weekend.

1. Please share an experience pertaining to a child that makes you feel proud.
2. To whom do you feel the greatest obligation to "help first" on any given day?
3. What are three things you would do to improve communication in your school?
4. With few exceptions, principals seem to be out of the building quite often. What percentage of the time is your principal gone each week? What are the reasons for these absences?
5. What types of decisions are you expected to routinely make? What decisions are you the most comfortable making? What decisions make you uncomfortable?
6. What is the present starting wage for school secretaries in your district? What was your starting wage?

Thank you for your time and consideration!
Pam
APPENDIX H. FIRST E-MAIL COORESPONDENCE
E-mail correspondence sent 2-18-02

Theme One: This could be considered an ideal job for mothers. Do you believe being a mother is necessary for being a competent school secretary? Does the fact that many secretaries are mother have anything to do with the job? Does a secretary act as “stand in” mother for some children?

Theme Two: The organization structures of many businesses overlook certain groups of employees. Do you believe the organization of public schools has overlooked the importance of the school secretary? If so, how?

Theme Three: Secretaries share many duties with the principals. Some are important decision-making duties. Should this happen? Does the idea of “running the school one minute and not the next create conflict for you?

Theme Four: Few school secretaries have input in school improvement. What could be changed concerning this issue?
APPENDIX I. SECOND E-MAIL COORESPONDENCE
E-mail correspondence from 4-16-02

1. Would you consider belonging to an area secretary networking group if there was one within 30 minutes of your home?

2. Would you consider paying a membership fee ($20) to attend quarterly meetings?

3. What topics would you want to discuss at such meetings?

4. Did anyone attend the SAI meeting in Des Moines last week?

5. If so, what was it like?

6. Has participation in this research project affected you in any way?

7. Could I have done other activities or focused on other topics in our conversations?

Thank you for your input. I'll keep you posted on the final paper. — Pam
REFERENCES


Iowa Department of Education. (2002). Area Education Agencies in Iowa.


