

**Gender, Memory and the Experience of
Selective Secondary Schooling in Newcastle,
New South Wales, from the 1930s to the 1950s**

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(signed)

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This research is dedicated to the women and men who so generously gave their time and their

stories,

and

to

my mother

Georgia (1926-1989)

who loved her time at Newcastle Girls High School.

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ABSTRACT

Despite all that has been written about the history of Australian education, there is little to show about how schools were experienced by the students for whom they were built. This thesis is an attempt to recover students' experiences of schooling at one place in one type of schooling, from the 1930s to the 1950s. The study is situated in Newcastle, the largest provincial city in Australia. The analysis concentrates on the memories of forty female and male informants about their experiences at two state secondary schools which were selective and single sex. The schools were Newcastle Girls High School and Newcastle Boys High School.

The thesis employs a blended oral history methodology developed for the study called 'history-in-the-round'. The analysis is multi layered. First, the thesis aims to increase knowledge about secondary education in the past from the students' point of view. Second, utilising the analytic lens of gender, schools are examined as places where students were constructed as young women and men. Third, the thesis includes reflections upon the nature of personal and social memory.

The history-in-the-round study produced a portrait of student experiences of their schooling during the period. It traced students' progress through their schooling from the time of their selection and transition from the primary schools until their exits at various points from the secondary system. It exposed the micro practices of the schools to scrutiny with regard to such areas as students' experiences of curriculum, teachers and extra curricula activities. Furthermore, the research affirmed the importance of factors outside of the ambit of the schools, in particular family, in the experience of secondary schooling and transition out of the schools into the workforce.

The fundamental differences in the women's and men's stories were not at first apparent as they recalled their experiences of transition into high school. Both groups recounted similar stories, filled with anxiety about the move from primary to secondary school. The deeper the analysis moved into their experiences of high school, the greater the divergences based upon gender that were displayed. By the time both groups were ready to leave school, they were set on radically different courses arising in the first instance from their sex role differentiation. Although race

was not a variable in the analysis since all of the students were European, the research did reveal the power of economic and social class to produce divergent educational experiences and outcomes for both females and males. The thesis underscores the importance of awareness of class in gendered analyses.

One of the basic findings was that the boys school operated within the wider society's hegemonic view of masculinity. The school offered no challenges to the existing social order. Instead it supported that order. The school articulated its role as producing young men who would be breadwinners, social leaders, and soldiers should the society need them. The ideal model of masculinity held up to the students was 'the gentleman'. On the whole, the male interviewees were less conscious of the forces exerted by gender formation than were the women.

On the other hand, the girls school occupied an ambivalent position. Its project was deeply subversive of traditional gender roles for women, especially for high achieving girls. This subversion happened directly and indirectly. In the direct way, for example, female students were encouraged to think in terms of careers. Indirectly unmarried professional women teachers modelled an alternative life path for women outside of the domestic norm. At the same time as it was subverting the gender order, the school was advocating and reinforcing a strict normative model of femininity based on the concept of 'the lady'. These basic differences in orientation formed the foundation for the variations in the cultures of each school.

In the final section the women and the men reflected upon the differences between the education they received and education as they perceive it now. Their conclusions form the basis for an analysis of educational mythologies that exist today and which shape ideas about schools now. In this way the past 'lives' and informs the politics of schooling in New South Wales.

