‘A very big change’

Transition from primary to academic high school in Newcastle, New South Wales, from the 1930s to the 1950s

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This article explores the primary to secondary school transition of 40 women and men who attended two single-sex academic high schools in Newcastle, New South Wales, from the 1930s to the 1950s. The researcher employs a blended methodology, including narrative and linguistic analysis of oral sources. Gender is explored as a factor in the narratives of transition. The article shows how society, school and student interacted to make the primary to secondary school transition an important status passage in the lives of female and male students. Rather than being about gender, the transition to secondary education was about age, about becoming ‘bigger’. Informants’ experiences of this transition exhibited many of the characteristics of a ‘rite of passage’.

Between the 1930s and the 1950s in New South Wales, as the state system of secondary education expanded, high schools increasingly acted as agents for the management of ‘a succession of life stages’ between childhood and adulthood (Campbell 1997, p.392). For increasing numbers of children during this period, the transition out of childhood was marked by their movement from primary to secondary school, which constituted one of the major developments of early adolescence (Connell, Francis & Skilbeck 1957, pp.78-9). Studies of transition out of childhood by Australian historians of education have tended to concentrate on the transition from school to work (for example, Bessant & Cook 1998; Holbrook 1987, 1990, 1991). This emphasis in the literature on transition reflects concerns about the economic outcomes of education for the student and for society. Such an emphasis reinforces research trends that ignore the psychosocial experience of education for children themselves.

Utilising oral history and documentary sources, this article explores the primary to secondary school transition of 40 women and men who had been selected to attend two single-sex academic high schools — Newcastle Girls High School (NGHS) and Newcastle Boys High School (NBHS) — from the 1930s to the 1950s. The transition period is taken to cover the final months of primary schooling, in which students were assessed for selection to high school, until a few months after they had been in the secondary schools. From the point of view of the informants, the transition to secondary education was an important status passage, characterised by becoming ‘bigger’. Furthermore,
informants’ experiences of this transition exhibited many of the characteristics of a ‘rite of passage’ (Van Gennep 1960).

**SCHOOL PRESTIGE AS A CONTEXT FOR TRANSITION INTO HIGH SCHOOL**

The high standing of NGHS and NBHS within the Newcastle region contributed to the sense that transition to high school was an important event. This prestige can be attributed to several factors shared by all selective high schools in NSW in the period. First, the academic high schools were considered to provide elite education for professional futures; second, they were believed to have the ‘best’ teachers in the NSW system; and third, they drew upon the English public school tradition as a source of legitimation for their prestige (Connell 1980; Bessant 1984). In Newcastle the status of NGHS and NBHS was enhanced because there were no competing private schools of note.

Another factor that emphasised the prestige of the schools was the competitive mode of entry to them. The entrance examinations had undergone various changes before 1930: the Qualifying Certificate (1911) changed to the Permit to Enrol and the High School Entrance and Bursary Examination (1922), which in turn were replaced by the Primary Final (1930). The high school entrance component of the Primary Final examination was maintained in Newcastle, Sydney and Parramatta until 1943. From then, until 1956, selection was determined by assessment of sixth class results in mathematics and English, intelligence tests and students’ ‘special features’ (Wyndham Report 1957). A committee of school inspectors and the local school principals would meet to allocate students to high schools (Bessant & Spaul 1976, pp.85-6). The effect of the changes to the selection process was that age grading would eventually replace merit as the criteria for progression to secondary schooling (Seddon 1993). The means-tested, competitive bursary examination continued throughout the period. For students, the selection process emphasised the impressiveness of the high schools because students were directly involved in the examinations and/or intelligence tests.

A further reason why selection to NGHS and NBHS was highly valued was the public recognition and increased visibility within the community that accompanied it. Until 1948 the selected children had their names listed in the local paper. Once students were selected they became more visible in the community because, often for the first time, they had to travel on public transport to go to school and were required to wear high school uniforms.

**TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL — THE WOMEN’S MEMORIES**

The women’s memories of transition into high school fell into a number of distinct themes, including ‘agency’ in the process, the high school entrance examinations, first memories of NGHS, uniforms and travel. Most of the women remembered having very little agency in their transition into high school. Some, such as Gladys and Dorothy, recalled that their primary school teachers chose NGHS for them. Others who were good performers academically at their primary schools just assumed that they would be going to NGHS. Jane ‘never doubted’ that she would be going there and Enid ‘expected to go there’. Grace wanted to go to NGHS because she ‘was out for a bit of prestige’. Moya believed that she had no choice because successful bursary girls in the state school system in Newcastle went to NGHS. She said: ‘It was just — I was going for a bursary. I would go to Girls High.’

**Entrance and bursary examinations**

Most of the women remembered their awareness of the importance of the competition to be selected for NGHS. All the girls who sought entry to NGHS before 1943 had to sit for a competitive entrance examination. Some girls also sat for a bursary examination to qualify for financial assistance in their secondary schooling. The primary schools played a pivotal role in preparing, or not preparing, their students for testing. Olga said that she knew that there would be a test before they went to high school: ‘we knew it was pretty important that we passed it but that was about it’. Some primary teachers worked hard at impressing their students with the importance of the examination. Esmie said that the examination’s importance ‘was certainly made known’ to them. Enid said that there was a teacher at her primary school who was ‘very very keen for her students to excel and get to Newcastle Girls High School’ and so she ‘felt it was a bit of an aim’ to achieve selection. Moya was ‘almost ill’ before her Primary Final because she believed that she had to ‘keep up the standard’ she had set in primary school where she was the top student. Overall recollections of the entrance examinations revealed a range of responses, including confidence and anxiety.

Memories of the bursary examination in particular had an earnest quality. Judged as disadvantaged by a means test, these girls from homes with small incomes were competing for money. Eight of the women informants sat for the bursary and three — Meg, Moya and Elaine — were awarded them. Elaine remembered the ‘honour’ of receiving a bursary, while Moya believed that it marked her out as poor for the rest of her time at NGHS. Grace, who did not win a bursary, recalled that she lacked the cultural capital the examination required. This was the ‘Catch 22’ of the bursary examinations: they were tests instituted to assist lower-class children of ability, but they favoured the student who already possessed middle-class cultural knowledge and skills (McCull 1993).

**First impressions of Newcastle Girls High School**

The memories of a majority of the women about going to NGHS for the first time demonstrated that this was a very important time for them, marked by heightened emotions. The adjectives the women used to describe their first reactions to the school illustrated their feelings. Gladys said she felt ‘very insignificant, very frightened, very apprehensive’. Olga recalled that the first day was ‘very different’, ‘strange’ and ‘bewildering’. Joan was ‘a bit upright’ and Grace ‘pretty daunted’ while Enid was ‘pretty nervous on the first day’. Esmie was ‘fairly terrified’. Moya found it all ‘a bit terrifying’ but also ‘fairly exciting’. For Nancy, the transition was simply ‘big’ and Kathleen said it was ‘a culture shock’. Elaine felt like ‘a little frog in a big pond’. It was the size of it all that
impressed her: ‘See, coming from the primary school — I suppose everyone felt the same — to the big high school, with the gymnasium and the big assembly hall and the library and all that sort of thing. You were in a bigger world.’

Fear was a frequently recalled response. Esme explained why she was ‘terrified’: ‘Because once again, we were little girls of eleven selected from all over Newcastle ... in totally unknown surroundings’. She said that it took her six months to get over that initial fear. Meg had only recently come to her primary school from the country, and ‘was very nervous. I thought I would know nobody, because very few people from my school got into Girls High.’

Not all the informants remembered being nervous. Rose felt proud to have been one of three from her primary school to have been chosen for NGHS. She thought it was ‘very awe-inspiring’, and the transition to NGHS was ‘not a trauma’, not ‘too big a step’. A little later she would find it ‘a bit of a shock when you were first, second or third in your primary and then you go to high school and you aren’t top dog anymore’. Jane had a sister at NGHS and she was quite confident and glad to go. Peggy was excited to be going to the ‘big school’.

The first day at school — ‘on another planet’

On their initial day at NGHS the first year girls were assembled in the school hall. There they were assigned to one of an alphabetically arranged hierarchy of classes on the basis of their ranking in the selection process. Those girls with the highest ranking were allocated to the A class, the next most able group became the B class, and so on. Allocation to a class, however, could also depend on the subjects a student chose. This was because classes followed different courses of study. Once selected for their classes, the girls received a list of the items they would need in order to pursue their studies at the school. The women recalled their first day at high school in a variety of ways. Gladys said that, looking back, it was ‘very impersonal’. Joyce remembered that, after a long train trip accompanied by her elder sister, she was ‘pushed’ through the gate of her new school: ‘And I had to go and front up and say who I was and everything else and do it all myself you see.’ Louise was lost in space on that first day:

Scary, very scary for me. Lonely, I can remember the first day going and feeling like I was on another planet ... We were all put in together but I think I was very nervous, very jittery. I can still see the image of looking at the school, the concrete, we didn’t have any concrete at Toronto school, we had asphalt. The concrete and the brick buildings. It was a two storey building, I can remember feeling sort of overwhelmed.

Some who went with other girls from their primary school suffered separation anxiety and feared rejection. Joan reflected: ‘I suppose most people were in the same boat: they didn’t know anyone, sort of smiling tentatively, hoping no one turns their back on you, anything awful like that.’ Raie recalled a friendly atmosphere: ‘There was an assembly when we got there, Grace McPhee played “The Holy City” and that’s when we met all the girls from the other schools.’ Enid knew many of the faces in the assembly hall on her first day ‘because Newcastle wasn’t a very big place at that stage’ and she found the grading process, where the girls were allotted their classes, ‘very interesting’. The assignment to classes that occurred on this first day of school was an important part of, and the next step in, the selection process. It determined the type of course studied, and reflected the type of future envisaged for the student involved.

Coupled with their first impressions of NGHS, memories of the first day indicated the psychological nature of the transition into high school. The transition was mostly characterised by fear, ranging from apprehension to terror, although some girls, such as Enid and Raie, were comfortable in their new surroundings. There was the sense of the strangeness and spaciousness of the new school. Social aspects of the transition were indicated by the fact that students were separated from their former peers and were introduced to new groups of people from all over the district. They would now represent a new collective identity: they had become NGHS girls.

Signs of membership of the new school community: uniforms

Within the context of the women’s recollection of their transition to high school, uniforms and travel figured prominently. The issue of uniforms arose often because of its novelty: this was the first time for most that they had to wear a uniform to school. The NGHS uniform, which remained the same throughout the period (and beyond), consisted of a white blouse, a navy tunic with three box pleats front and back and belted at the waist, a necktie in school colours of red and blue, a navy blazer, navy gloves, a panama hat with band in the school colours, black stockings and black lace-up shoes. This uniform, including colours to designate the school attended, had its origins in the English public schools (Davidson 1990; Spender & Sarah 1980).

Moya’s memory of her first day at NGHS exemplified the way the subject of uniforms arose spontaneously within memories of transition into high school. She recalled that the first day was ‘weird’: ‘I can remember that we had to write an essay of what we thought about the school, what was different, and oh, of course the uniforms, everybody in their uniforms and they were meticulous about that.’ For Raie, the uniform contributed to the excitement of starting school because she had not worn one before. Yet she was embarrassed on her first day because she was the only one who did not have ‘a brand new outfit’ and her tunic was different to that of the other girls: ‘I don’t know why my mother didn’t buy me the exact one like everybody else.’ Kathleen was dressed in a white serge pleated skirt and a white twin set for her first day. This was ‘cringe stuff’ to her: ‘Can you imagine? Everybody else was in navy blue and I was in white.’ As Raie and Kathleen’s memories attest, uniform signified membership of the new group, and any variation in it was unwelcome.

Other women recalled positive and negative reactions to their uniforms. Olga had never worn a uniform before and she liked it. Slipping easily into the collective pronoun signifying the group, she spoke for herself and other girls when she said: ‘So a uniform was new and we didn’t object to it, we thought it was good, we liked it.’ Joan recalled that she hated the uniform: ‘I was always painfully thin ... the uniform was I think my
main worry, I absolutely hated it.' The important thing that Gladys remembered about her uniform was not whether she liked it or not, but that her mother had to take out a loan to supply her with it: 'It cost all of ten pound I think to outfit me. Mum got it on time payment, I remember that.' As McColl (1993) found in her study of girls attending Perth Modern selective high school for the first time in 1954, supplying school uniforms was the 'major additional cost' for families and could cause 'real difficulties'.

Despite the fact that uniforms were supposed to banish all social and economic differences between girls, the state of one's uniform could highlight economic class. Coe (1981) has written that the Australian class system 'is subtle and complex' and that Australian children can experience their first awareness of class at school. Anne, for example, became aware for the first time of her working-class background when she started at NGHS:

As soon as I got to high school I became aware that there were some girls who had different attitudes to me, and there were girls there having no problems with nice uniforms and nice shoes and who had rain coats and umbrellas ... and I think for the first time I found people who would laugh at me because I didn't have these things.'

Moya noticed that some of the girls had silk uniforms in summer: she was: 'so envious because I wore a serge tunic, you know, summer and winter, and a blazer in winter, and that was my concession to the season'. Uniforms were one of the ways that students began to position themselves not only as members of the school's community but also in relation to one another.

A number of British researchers have reflected upon the significance of uniforms for girls. Payne (in Spender & Sarah 1980) commented upon the class and gender dimensions of her school uniform. She wrote that the uniform characterised 'a clear set of values' belonging to the ruling class, such as sobriety and discipline. The uniform was part of the process of destroying individual and class identity, as well as of 'enforcing a particular set of bourgeois values, based on ideas of respectability, smartness and appearance'. Payne claimed that the uniform was designed to disguise any hint of sexuality with a 'more masculinised image'. She wrote: 'It was almost as though femininity had to be sacrificed to the pursuit of knowledge.' Judith Okeley (1996) noted that school uniforms for girls had 'strange male traits' such as lace-up shoes, ties and blazers. Female students imitated men. Because of its male character, the uniform created a discontinuity: 'Unlike the boys' uniforms, ours was discontinuous with the clothes we would wear in adulthood ... There was no link between our past and our future.' The space opened up between the past and the future, symbolised by the discontinuity of the uniform, may have been a positive, empowering one for some girls. In their quasi-male attire selective high school girls became identified with masculine structures of power in society. This may have created an imaginative space where girls could anticipate different, non-domestic futures for themselves. Certainly the uniform, even if it did not prevent class awareness, or prove to be very flattering, emphasised membership of a special, more disciplined, school community. The uniform was the outward and visible sign of a new level of seriousness in their education.

Travelling to school — 'it opened up my world a little bit'

Transition memories about 'going to' high school accounted for movement in historical time and through physical space. Many of the women recalled not only their first days at high school and the uniforms but also travel to school. When asked about her transition, Peggy immediately recalled not the school but the journey: 'I can't remember the first time [at NGHS], I know we had to walk down the hill and catch the tram into Bank Corner and then walk up, and later there were buses.' For many, travelling to school on public transport was an initiation into the wider world. Margaret said that 'it was a big thing to catch the bus'. Olga, who attended an inner city primary school not all that far from NGHS, was proud of her ability to go alone: 'some of the girls' parents went with them but I looked down on that, I went by myself'. Raie said that her transition to high school was not very traumatic, 'except I got the tram by myself'. With hindsight, she said: 'it was an enormous sense of freedom'. Grace commented on the 'little bit of independence' travelling to school afforded her, and the way 'it opened my world a little bit'.

Because NGHS drew students from a very wide geographic area, travel memories were often very strong for those who lived far from the school. For example, Nancy lived in the mining township of Killingworth in the Lower Hunter. Her journey started at 6.45 am with a lorry ride to the nearby township of Barmley. She then caught a bus, followed by a train. She walked the final part of the way to school. Sometimes Nancy was still late for the beginning of classes at 9 am. Over these longer journeys, transport was often sex segregated. Louise, who went alone on her first day, caught the train from Toronto to Newcastle, a journey of about an hour: 'We travelled separately in the train, girls in the back carriages and boys in the front. The general public wasn't allowed in the school children's carriages.' Gladys, who travelled by bus, left home at 7.15 am. Often she arrived just in time for the start of classes and did not return home until after dark. She recalled that the girls were upstairs on the bus, the boys were downstairs and that this arrangement was 'pretty rigid'. Travelling to school was an important part of the transition experience. It required a new level of responsibility and provided an important arena for autonomous action. Travel arrangements also supported the sex segregation of secondary students.

TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL — THE MEN'S MEMORIES

The boys and the girls were processed by the same system in order to enter the selective high schools. Categories of preparation for high school, means of selection, travel, uniforms and initial experiences also arose from the men's discussion of transition. Some of the men had no idea about, and no preparation for, high school. Bill was 'bewildered' by the whole process. Gordon said it was 'just general knowledge' that NBHS was the 'only high school in the district' and that places there were limited. He knew nothing about what high school would be like: he 'just assumed that it would be pretty much as it was'. For Bob, who had just turned 11 when he went there, NBHS 'could have been on Mars for all I knew'.

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Other men recalled that they had some knowledge of NBHS before going. Don said that at his school: ‘everybody aimed to get to Boys High School’. Wai knew some boys who went to NBHS and said that he ‘knew it would be different’ from primary school. While Eric didn’t know much detail about his selection, he was ‘almost agog with excitement of learning esoteric subjects like Latin and chemistry’. Gary and his parents were called down to the primary school and told that he was to repeat sixth class and then go on to NBHS. The reasons he was given for this were his young age and his IQ score.

Entrance and bursary examinations

Most of the men discussed the competitive mode of entrance to NBHS. For example, three who were not chosen to go to NBHS straight from primary school, but who went there later, remembered the selection process. Alfred said he had no idea what to expect when he did the High School Entrance Examination, nor indeed what it meant. He reflected on his bewilderment:

That’s the first time I came to an examination that I couldn’t understand. Why were some people going to Boys High and [why] was I going to the Technical School? ... My friend went to Boys High and I finished up at Tech High ... had no idea of what it was all about ... Oh they [the teachers] may have told us, maybe it didn’t register, or I didn’t quite understand at the time. I was just confused.

Bill, who worked hard to be transferred to NBHS in second year, recalled the day in 1929 he sat for the ‘Qualifying Certificate’ and the Permit to Enrol. For him it was ‘just another day at school’. The third man, Keith, said: ‘I didn’t make Boys High at that point, and I went to Junior High. I don’t think in those days I had a choice.’ Alfred, Bill and Keith’s memories of not being selected for NBHS show that boys were aware of the competition for entry. Don said that he was told that only the ‘top one hundred’ went to NBHS. He was not chosen the first time around, so he repeated sixth class in order to qualify for the school.

The competition in sixth class between the top academic students could be fierce. Students discovered their ranking in relation to one another when they arrived at the high school on the first day. Their names were read out in order of merit. Colin recalled how he and another boy competed. When they were assigned to their classes on their first day at NBHS, Colin remembered that, as his name was called out before that of his friend, he quietly thought: ’I beat him!’ Others, such as Reg and Cyril, recalled the competition in terms of the hierarchy of schools. Cyril said: ’In those days the top ones went to Newcastle Boys High’, and Reg linked the schools to boys’ future employment:

So if you were going to be a doctor or a lawyer, you went to Boys High. If you were going to be an engineer, you went to Tech High, and if you were going to do an apprenticeship you would go to Central. That’s theoretically what it was like.

Two of the men did not enter NBHS through the normal selection process. When Richard’s private school relocated to the country at the start of World War Two, his family had ‘to fall back on the state system’. He was allowed to go to NBHS one year early on the proviso that he repeated first year. Eric’s selection was different again in that he was given a personal sitting of the ACER Standard Arithmetic Tests by the school counsellor. He does not know why this occurred. All he did know was that he was selected for NBHS and went into the A class, where he stayed for his entire secondary schooling.

Those men who sat for a bursary recalled it for different reasons. Brian could not help but remember the bursary because he sat for it on the day of his father’s funeral. A family conference was held and it was decided that Brian would take the examination. He ‘managed’ and was awarded the bursary for 1951. Bob, on the other hand, had ‘no idea’ what the bursary meant. He remembered that when he won the bursary, his father immediately said: ‘You will go to Boys High at Waratah’. Bob said that only once was his status as a bursar commented on at NBHS and that was in the first week of his first year. Otherwise he and the only other bursar in his year were given no support or counselling. Both struggled in the early years of their secondary schooling.

Selection for the younger men, Brian and Gary, involved IQ testing rather than high school entrance examinations. This process was resented by both men. They felt that they had no choice, that they were at the mercy of unseen forces. Brian said:

[I]n sixth class, I did the IQ test, and we didn’t know what they were, you know, it was all a game really. Anyway subsequently from that test, they allocated you to schools, and you had no choice in the matter, you were told where you were going.

Gary took IQ tests, which today he still believes are ‘a joke’, and he was chosen to go to NBHS. Asked about this selection, he commented: ’Ah “selected” is the word, and then the word is “sent”. You weren’t selected and asked did you want to go ... I can assure you I had no choice in selection.’ Although his parents were very proud of him, especially his father, who had gone to NBHS, Gary looked upon the school as ‘just another place I had to eke out existence before I could leave’.

First experiences at Newcastle Boys High School

As with NGHS, students came from all over the district to NBHS. Some, such as Bill, were proud that they went by themselves from the first day. Others were at first taken to school by an older person. On arrival, the boys were mustered and assigned to classes. Richard recalled his first day ‘quite clearly’ as ‘the hardest of them all’:

And we walked in ... there was a crowd I suppose of fifty, quite a big crowd of small boys, none of them having the faintest idea of what’s going to happen next. I remember I struck up a conversation with a boy who was next to me, his name I remember quite well ... and so we waited there rather nervously, until a large teacher appeared through the door.

Richard said that he was the odd man out because he had not been selected to go to the school through the entrance examination process. He did not have a ranking upon which the teachers could assign him to a class and they did not know at first what to do with him.

Some men recalled an easy transition to high school. Gordon said that, although there were a lot of strangers and although it was ‘different’, he felt that he was in the same boat as everybody else. Cyril recalled that he was quite sanguine about the process.
Don found the transition easy because he was 'a bit older', having repeated sixth class at primary school. Wal said of his transition: 'Big school, go to big school, yes, no big drama, no big deal.' He added that: 'Anything new has a bit of drama attached to it, same as starting work for the first time.' He was the only one to mention an initiation ceremony, where new boys were thrown from a high retaining wall at the 'Hill' premises of NBHS. Wal only 'went over once' because he was above average height and weight, while some took the ceremonial fall four, five or six times. This ceremony died when NBHS moved from its premises on top of a steep hill in the centre of the city in 1934, to the new school buildings that were positioned on low-lying, flat ground at Waratah (Newcastle Morning Herald, 25/11/50).

Others recalled being scared to varying degrees during the transition. Reg had been looking forward to starting high school because 'it was big time'. He remembered actually starting, 'being there and giving out classes, told what books we had to get and that was it'. However, he said that he 'got a bit of a shock when I got there' because 'it was much more regimented than primary school. Because you had a different teacher for each subject, and you moved from room to room.' Bob said that it was overall 'a pretty scary experience'. Brian conveyed the drastic nature of the change that he and others like him went through:

You go from being top dog in the primary school ... when you get to high school [there's] a great levelling. You know, they're all top dogs, and you look at these monstrous kids, you know, they're seven feet tall, and you're only this little wimp.

Gordon agreed that the size of the other students was remarkable, but it did not make him afraid:

It seemed a bigger world, there were so many more people there and we were the youngest ones ... It did seem different in that respect, that there were so many more bigger than me, they all seemed so much older and bigger than we were. It wasn't a trauma, I wasn't scared or anything like that.

Charles didn't think that there was 'anything traumatic about changing from one [school] to the other', although:

Going to high school was probably a bit nerve-racking in the first couple of days ... well any experience that is new, that you haven't experienced before, you must have a hidden fear about it, fear of the unknown with anything. It's like in war time ... somebody said: 'Long periods of immense boredom, interspersed with short periods of great fear.'

In a more understated way, the men's memories of their first experiences at NBHS described the same spectrum of emotions as was found in the women's memories. Some were nonchalant, some were quite happy, and others were 'a bit scared'. The men did mention the size of other students at NBHS, whereas the women did not. The men as little boys recalled the sense of awe, and perhaps threat, inspired by the proximity of larger, stronger males.

Travel — 'everybody spent more time getting to school'

Travelling to and from school was remembered by those who had long or complicated journeys. Because NBHS had been built at Waratah, which was an awkward suburb to get to for many, this was often the case. For example, Richard lived at Toronto. His school day trip took an hour and a half each way. He remembered that the trains were sex-segregated, with girls in the front two carriages and boys in the back two:

And certainly the idea was that the twain shouldn't meet. However, of course, the twain did meet and made sure to it that they would, and when they weren't meeting, they waved to each other frantically out of the train windows.

Charles, who left home 'practically in the dark', had to catch a bus and two trains. He did quite a bit of school work on the train 'if you weren't mucking up!' Bill was happy to travel alone and so was Cyril. Bob, who travelled by ferry and bus, was accompanied by his mother for his first trip to the school.

Uniforms

While they travelled, students were regarded as representing their school. They were identified by the uniform they wore. NBHS had a uniform, although it was a flexible one, especially during the 1930s Depression. Basically boys were required to have grey trousers and the school tie of red and blue stripes. There was a hat band and a pocket, embroidered with the school insignia, if one could afford them.

Not as many of the men talked about the uniform. Perhaps this was because the boys' uniform was less novel than for the girls. Men wore suits and ties, thus the boys' uniform was continuous with their future roles as breadwinners. Colin's parents bought his grey suit from the Newcastle Co-operative Store. Richard 'always' had his uniform, a grey suit with the badge worked into the pocket, although he had to suffer the then familiar indignity of wearing his brother's cast-offs. Bob, with 'a dawning consciousness' of class, said that his uniform became a focus for attention as time went by. He remembered that, while he was 'never sent to school dirty or with rags or anything like that', the clothes of the other boys 'gradually improved'. He recalled that he was 'the last out of short trousers' and that he invariably wore the same clothes to school. The first thing he did with his first teacher's salary was to buy a new pair of trousers. Gary did not wear grey trousers for 15 years after his time at NBHS, so great was his antipathy for the uniform and everything it represented.

CONCLUSION

The process of transition into high school involved a number of important facets. From primary schools in the suburban and outlying areas, small numbers of students were selected to attend these two single-sex academic high schools. Many travelled for the first time on public transport, alone, and over long distances. The uniform they wore identified the students as people with potential, as young persons in training for profes-
sional futures. They would have many teachers and move from room to room. They would make new friends from all over the district.

Gender differences in accounts of the transition to high school were minimal. No-one, for example, mentioned moving from coeducational primary classrooms to a single-sex school. Perhaps this was because the separation of the sexes at school, which in the primary school usually meant separate playgrounds and separate seating in classrooms, was so normal to them that it did not require comment. A few informants did mention the fact that the public transport to and from school was sex segregated. Some corroboration can be found, however, for Delamont’s conclusions regarding gender and transition to high school in the United Kingdom. She said that girls expected psychological violence and shaming, while boys feared physical violence (Delamont 1989). In this case, for example, Joan feared that girls would turn their backs on her, Wal expected that he would be ‘initiated’ by being thrown over a steep incline. Some of the men recalled that they were impressed, or intimidated, by the size of the other males at NBHS. Overall, the women and the men recounted similar experiences. Perhaps this can be accounted for because they were usually between the ages of 11 and 12, and therefore only at the beginning of the development of secondary sex characteristics. Rather than being about gender, the transition to secondary education was about age, about becoming ‘bigger’.

The similarity in the narratives of both women and men on this point can be demonstrated by an examination of the dominant modes of description and metaphors employed by them to describe the transition experience. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claimed that the use of metaphor is pervasive in ‘human language and in the human conceptual system and is a primary vehicle for understanding’. Metaphor is ‘imaginative rationality’, a way to explain experience. Thus the metaphors employed by the women and the men provide the key to the meaning of the transition experience for them.

The first and most frequent of the metaphors was size or quantification encapsulated by the word ‘big’. Some instances, by no means exhaustive, of the use of ‘big’ will illustrate the point. ‘Big’ was used, for example, to describe the physical reality of the school (‘big school’ — Joyce, Olga, Wal, Elaine) and its spaces (in the ‘big hall’ — Gladys and Elaine); the size of the change they underwent (‘a very big change’ — Eric; a ‘big transition’ — Jean and Kathleen); the new status attained on being secondary students (‘we thought we were big time’ — Jean; ‘I’m a big boy now’ — Keith); the expansion of their experiential realm (‘a bigger world’ — Gordon). ‘Big’ also described the other young people (Brian) and the teachers (Richard) they came into contact with, as well as the subjects they would study, which were meant for ‘big’ people. The use of ‘big’ shows how little the students felt in coming to this new type of education. The use of the childlike word ‘big’ might signify an imaginative recreation of the archaic child self in the oral testimonies. Through such words the child speaks. The use of the word ‘big’ confirmed that large forces were at work in transition and a vital step in the journey toward adulthood had been taken. Gladys summed it up when she said: ‘It was a big thing to go from a little place to a big school you know.’

These findings corroborate those of Delamont (1996) in her British study of primary school to secondary school transition. Other metaphors underscore another of Delamont’s conclusions: that the transition to secondary school is a ‘status passage’ that is ‘full of anxiety’. ‘Very’ was used a lot in this context. They recalled being ‘very nervous’ or ‘very frightened’ or ‘very scared’. Louise and Bob thought of their transition as moving into a new world. For Bob, he might just as well as be going to Mars, while Louise said it was ‘like going to another planet’. Some employed animal imagery: they were ‘frogs’ moving from a little pond to a big pond, or ‘top dogs’ becoming underdogs.

The individual and social significance of the transition into high school, as described in this article, can be further elucidated by applying Arnold Van Gennep’s schema of the ‘rite of passage’. The schema entailed three phases: separation, threshold or transition, and incorporation (Van Gennep 1960). In this study, the entrance examinations were the means by which separation of these individuals from their old group was achieved. The separation initiated the transitional phase. This liminal phase is ‘a situation in which persons are brought together independent of such roles and boundaries as kinship or classes’ (Vizedom 1976, p.9). Threshold or transition corresponded to their first days at NGHS and NBHS. This is a stage of disequilibrium, an anxious phase. Incorporation into the new group, signalled by uniforms and independent travel, occurred after students had settled into their new schools. Vizedom observed that: ‘the rites of passage in general address themselves to a tension between the changes inherent in the life of an individual human being and the relative stability of society’. Rites, which may be sacred or secular (Fried & Fried 1980, p.22), are social processes that operate to maintain the social order. They engender specific ‘emotional dispositions’ in the initiate in order to do so (Vizedom 1976, p.15). At the individual level, transition into a selective high school was most often remembered as filled with heightened emotions such as fear, awe or excitement. These emotions prepared the students for the seriousness of their new role as selective school students and for the extra discipline they would be required to enact.

At the societal level, the transition into high school preserved the social identification of distinct life stages in an increasingly secular age and reinforced mechanisms of social control over the life of the individual, thereby maintaining social stability. Further, in the post-World War Two period, all adolescents would be required to undergo this rite of passage into secondary schools where they would be prepared for citizenship. It was believed that only ‘within the embrace’ of the secondary school could adolescents become effective Australian citizens (Faye 1998). The primary to secondary school rite of passage was the essential first step in this process.

NOTE
1. All informants are identified by their first names. Most of the interviews are contained in an archive in the possession of the researcher. Some tapes are held in the Youth at School and Work Project, Department of Education, University of Newcastle, NSW. For full details regarding the interviews, including the methodology for their collection, analysis and use, see J.R. May (2000) ‘Gender, Memory and the Experience of Selective Schooling in Newcastle, NSW, 1930s to the 1950s’, PhD thesis, University of Newcastle.
REFERENCES


