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**SEPARATE BUT EQUAL?
THE ENDURING APPEAL
OF THE
SINGLE-SEX PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS
OF
NEW SOUTH WALES**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

FIONA JANE MUELLER
BA DipEd MEd

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
2007

Thesis certification

I, Fiona Jane Mueller, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Fiona Jane Mueller

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Date:

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Abstract

During the 1960s the government of New South Wales adopted a comprehensive, coeducational model of schooling. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s dozens of boys' and girls' public schools were closed, amalgamated or restructured as a result of new policy commitments to equality of opportunity in education. Forty-six single-sex high schools remain in the public provision today, less than half the original number. Of these, twenty-four are girls' schools and twenty-two admit only boys. While one boys' school is located in a northern region of the state, the other forty-five are all to be found in the Sydney metropolitan area.

The single-sex public high school provision in New South Wales constitutes an Australian educational phenomenon. However, despite the unique nature and extent of this provision in contemporary Australian public education, the schools attract little mention in the research literature. Likewise, official education publications, particularly those intended for consumers, provide few references to the single-sex option. In this thesis, evidence is provided of the incomplete implementation of policies favouring the coeducational, comprehensive model. The contention is that this reflects an unresolved ideological tension between those who believe that educational equity can only be delivered through identical provision and those who maintain that segregation of the sexes can enable a more effective focus on the needs of male and female students, both during secondary school and in preparation for the post-school world.

This project focuses on the surviving New South Wales single-sex public high schools as a group left out of contemporary educational discourse. In seeking to understand their enduring appeal for consumers, the following key questions guided the research:

- Which schools are they?
- What sustains them?
- How do the schools fit into the provision of public education?
- What does the future look like for these schools?

A wide range of historical and contemporary informants, including former Ministers for Education, senior bureaucrats and retired principals, together with participants from nine single-sex public high schools, provided comprehensive data to answer these questions. In the absence of a policy discourse that engages with the single-sex public school option, this study examines the characteristics of these institutions, the basis for their enduring appeal to consumers, and the strategies used by some to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive education market.

Fiona Jane Mueller
July 2007

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John, Bethany and Ryan Wilshire

1 Introduction

The question isn't 'Why are they there?'
The question is 'Why are they *still* there?'
(Former Vice-President, NSW Teachers' Federation, 2003)

1.1 The enduring appeal of the New South Wales single-sex public high schools

This study focuses on the largest single-sex provision in Australian public education: forty-six boys' and girls' secondary schools that operate under the New South Wales government's jurisdiction. British researchers Smithers and Robinson (2006, p.1) assert that '[a]s survivors from an earlier system, they [single-sex schools] are a special sub-group.' The research investigates how and why these institutions have endured in spite of what the founder of an all-girls' school in America calls the 'near-death experience' of the single-sex alternative (Debare, 2004, p.6).

Consideration of the single-sex schools' origins is central to an appreciation of their contemporary nature and status. Prior to the 1960s the provision of public schooling in major metropolitan areas of New South Wales was characterised by deliberate segregation of the sexes in both the classroom and playground. Smith (1994, p.1) concludes that, '[c]hurch influence and the concentration of the population in relatively few large cities allowed the development of single-sex schools.' During the second half of the twentieth century critical ideological and policy shifts resulted in a major reduction in this model as it was replaced by the neighbourhood comprehensive coeducational school. In smaller urban communities outside Sydney the single-sex option was completely eliminated.

Despite their relatively large number, the remaining New South Wales single-sex public schools attract very infrequent references in the local and international literature. They appear to receive no systemic recognition for their reinvention as what Salomone (2003) calls 'second-generation schools', or institutions that advocate gender selectivity as a key contributor to the effectiveness of their educational programs. Inspired in part by Goodman's (2003) investigation into the place of gender in historiography, the contention of this study is that the schools have been treated 'dismissively'. That is, the practice of segregation by sex in itself appears to render

such schools inherently anomalous in terms of the ideology that continues to underpin public education. As will be seen, many of the schools have elected to market themselves as places where selectivity by gender is directly linked to the delivery of effective academic and other programs, as well as to an enhanced capacity to meet the individual needs of boys and girls. In the absence of a policy discourse that engages with the single-sex public school alternative, this study examines the characteristics of these institutions, the possible reasons for their enduring appeal to consumers, and the strategies used by some to distinguish themselves in a competitive education market. The research attempts to give a new voice to a cohort of public institutions that can claim to possess unique, firsthand experiences of separate schooling for males and females and, by extension, offer local, credible research opportunities to inform policy-making in the future.

1.2 The single-sex alternative in New South Wales public education

Examined from a national perspective, New South Wales public education is distinctive in terms of both the extent and the nature of the single-sex secondary school provision. A comparison of the provision of such schools in New South Wales with that of its Australian state and territory counterparts is shown in Figure 1.1.



See print copy for figure 1.1

South Australia has two single-sex girls' schools and Tasmania has one boys' school

and one girls' school within the public system. Single-sex primary schools no longer exist in any Australian public education provision. While there has been a largely unpublicised increase in the number of single-sex classes operating within existing coeducational public high schools, there has been no expansion of the single-sex public school option (Gill, 2004; Yaman, 2002; Raethel, 1996).

Of approximately 460 New South Wales public high schools, ten per cent cater for one sex only: 24 are girls' schools and 22 are boys' schools.¹ All but one of the 46 New South Wales single-sex government schools are located in the city of Sydney. The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) delivers public education to Sydney students from a central office via four metropolitan regions.² These are known as Northern Sydney Region, South-Western Sydney Region, Sydney Region, and Western Sydney Region. The distribution of single-sex schools across these regions is shown in Table 1.1. This table also includes the one non-metropolitan region containing a single-sex government school.

See print copy for table 1.1

¹ Source: NSW Department of Education and Training 'Statistics Bulletin for 2004', retrieved on 9 February 2006 from www.det.nsw.edu.au/reports_stats/stats/schools.htm

² A total of 10 regions serve the state of New South Wales. These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

1.3 Single-sex public education in the United States and England

An examination of public secondary education in two other English-speaking countries highlights the unique nature of the New South Wales single-sex public school provision.

In the United States Section 106.34 of Title IX of the Education Amendment Act 1972 states that ‘with only minimal exceptions, discrimination based on gender in public schools is prohibited’ (Streitmatter, 1999, p.2). After bringing much of the international evidence together for his own study of school types in the United States, Riordan’s (1990, p.ix) assessment of the prevailing attitude is that ‘[t]he presumption is that educational equality is furthered by coeducation, that single-sex education is inherently unequal.’ As a result of advocacy by Senators Kay Bailey Hutchison and Hillary Clinton, however, some of the legal restrictions on single-sex education were eased during the early years of this century, leading to reconsideration of this option in some school districts. Resistance to any change to the law has been strong, meaning that only forty-two fully single-sex public high schools existed in the United States at the time of completing this thesis, although many more institutions had introduced single-sex classes in some subjects (NASSPE, 2005; Silberman, 2004).

In contrast, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported in 1999-2000 that of nearly 11,000 private high schools, 562 were all-boys’ institutions and 470 admitted girls only. Giving an indication of a cautiously approbatory official view, a more recent US Department of Education statement includes the summary that ‘educational research has suggested that in certain circumstances, single-sex education provides educational benefits for some students’ (McAuliffe, 2004, n.p.). In November 2006 the Department of Education announced new legislation updating the rules of Title IX, which would allow same-sex education to be introduced in any district where it was believed that students’ achievement would be improved, the diversity of courses could be expanded, or it was perceived that this approach would be better suited to meeting children’s individual needs. According to the Secretary for Education, Margaret Spellings (Associated Press, 24 October 2006), the decision to

amend the legislation was based on the view that '[r]esearch shows that some students may learn better in single-sex education environments.'³

The experience of the English public system has been more akin to that of Australia in terms of the circumscription of the single-sex public school alternative. In England, says Gill (1988, p.2), the government education system was characterised by 'entrenched divisions' of students by sex and ability. As will be seen in later chapters, one consequence of this has been the establishment of single-sex 'grammar' schools across Australia. However, as Aldrich (2002, p.44) maintains, '[t]he period from 1965 until the end of the century [in England] witnessed the establishment of the comprehensive school as the main form of provision of education.' As in Australia, the introduction of the new model caused a significant reduction in the single-sex provision. Out of a total of 3,400 public secondary and middle schools across England, around 400 (226 girls' and 184 boys' schools) are single-sex, down from about 2,000 in the late 1960s. By 2005, less than half of all private secondary schools, where the single-sex structure had been a defining characteristic, catered for one sex only. The provision now includes 215 girls' schools and 81 boys' schools (Smithers & Robinson, 2006).

Smithers and Robinson (2006, p.iii) contend that although 'powerful narratives have been developed advocating single-sex or, alternatively, coeducational schooling' there is too little evidence to make a clear case for the effects of gender mix on the success of a school. They argue that, '[t]he government is attempting to create a market in the maintained [public] sector ... and it remains to be seen whether this will lead to more boys' and girls' schools' (p.iii).

³ www.cnn.com/2006/EDUCATION/10/24/single.sex.schools.ap/index.html, retrieved on 30 October 2006

1.4 Single-sex schools in the private sector

As explained earlier, the focus of this study is on the sizeable single-sex public school provision of New South Wales. In order to provide an adequate background to this study, however, it is important to note that single-sex education in Australia is now typically associated with non-government (also referred to as private) schools and school systems (Gill, 2004). These include single-sex institutions that identify with systemic Catholic, Anglican, Islamic and other denominations, as well as stand-alone denominational or non-denominational schools.⁴ While the Northern Territory has no single-sex schools at all, every other state or territory offers single-sex schooling alternatives in the private sector. New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria have the highest numbers. The greatest proportion of single-sex schools in every jurisdiction except Western Australia can be found in the Catholic sector (DEST, 2006).

1.4.1 Studies of single-sex private schools

The large number of single-sex institutions found in Catholic, Anglican and other independent systems may partly explain why much of the recent research in the area of single-sex education has necessarily involved schools from the non-government sector.

A literature search of single-sex private schools will normally reveal a wide range of school-based material, including school histories commissioned as part of major anniversary celebrations, biographies and memoirs of school leaders and personal accounts by and of famous alumni(ae). Such material generally reflects the strong traditions and perceptions of the academic and social standing of these institutions. It is useful to consider the description of these as ‘ruling class schools’ (for example, Gill, 1988; Walford, 1983; Connell et al, 1982; Branson & Miller, 1979), a nomenclature that connotes longstanding divisions between public and private systems.

⁴ Increased funding for non-government schools under the Howard Government (1992–) has encouraged the establishment of low-fee private schools across Australia. These have tended to open as coeducational institutions.

The histories of a small number of single-sex public high schools in Sydney indicate a similar association with middle and upper class social strata (Campbell, 2005). A search of school-based historical material brought forth documents claiming academic achievement and distinctive cultures that support the assertion that ‘the professional, business and governing elite...came from the old selective government schools [e.g. North Sydney Boys’ High School, Sydney Girls’ High School, Fort Street Boys’ High School] (2005, p.6). The competitive nature of the current education market is highlighted by the state’s media focus on the academic results of both government and non-government institutions. For example, it is interesting to consider which schools were deemed to be the fifty most successful institutions in the statewide 2006 Higher School Certificate examinations. As revealed in a recent newspaper article (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 2006, p.5), 38 of these schools are single-sex campuses, of which nine are public high schools. Of these, eight are academically selective schools and one is a girls’ comprehensive high school (see Appendix A).

In Australia, some earlier studies have concluded that single-sex schools, and particularly their non-government variants, generally attract more able students and students from higher SES backgrounds (Marsh, 1989a; Willis & Kenway, 1986). The characteristics of a school's intake are more significant than whether a school is single-sex or coeducational. Some researchers have found single-sex schools to be inherently more selective and capable of attracting more able students (Cuttance, 1995; Marsh, 1989a; Willis & Kenway, 1986). According to Marsh (1989a, p.70) the selective nature of single-sex schools means that ‘pre-existing variables ... probably invalidate the interpretation of single-sex/coed comparisons (e.g. Dale, 1974; Steedman, 1983, 1984; Willis & Kenway 1986)’.

Harris (1986), too, cites numerous studies indicating that the demographic characteristics of many single-sex institutions were a hindrance to credible comparisons of single-sex and coeducational models.

Given that the overwhelming majority of the most prestigious and selective high schools in Australia and Great Britain are single-sex schools, it is not surprising to find that students attending single-sex schools are often found to have parents of higher occupational, educational and income levels, as well as having higher educational aspirations themselves (Benn &

Simon 1971; Atheron 1973; Shaw 1976; Byrne 1978; Phillips 1979; Finn 1980; March, Relich & Smith 1983) and possibly higher IQ scores (Sutherland 1961; Dale 1969, 1971, 1974). These differences, as well as the fact that coeducational schools are more likely to be located in small towns or rural areas (Dale 1969, 1971, 1974) and to be larger than girls' schools and possibly boys' schools (Trickett, Trickett, Castro & Schaffner 1982) make it very difficult to interpret any research which attempts to compare the two types of schools. (p.119)

In this and subsequent chapters there are comprehensive references to a variety of studies that reflect the debate over single-sex and coeducational schooling. Such material attests to the longstanding and unresolved nature of the debate.

1.5 Categories of studies of single-sex schools

The purpose of this study is not to argue the relative merits of the two school types. However, by way of providing a broader context to the study it is useful to identify certain categories of studies involving single-sex and coeducational schools in both the public and private sectors. In keeping with the focus on the second half of the twentieth century discussed earlier, consideration of the relevant literature is restricted to material produced during that period.

1.5.1 Curriculum choices and academic achievement

Much of the research during the last decades of the previous century – highlighted in Australia by well-publicised government-sponsored projects such as the Schools' Commission Report on Education and Girls '*Girls, School and Society*' (1975) – focused on identifying perceived social and academic inequities experienced by female students (Moyle & Gill, 2005; Collins et al, 2000; Yates, 1996; Gill, 1988). This research demonstrated that girls and boys had access to, and were choosing, different subjects and subjects that differed in value. The students also demonstrated different patterns of school retention and were following markedly different post-school options.

From the mid-1970s an increase in the retention rate of girls stimulated interest in their subject choices and their preparation for post-school and tertiary destinations. In all Australian jurisdictions it became evident that the curricular and other structures in

many schools promoted gender stereotyping and that girls were less likely to choose senior mathematics and science than were boys (Schools Commission, 1975).

However, some studies indicated that girls in both public and private single-sex schools made more non-traditional choices (Ditchburn & Martin, 1986; Branson & Miller, 1979). Ditchburn and Martin's (1986) investigation of nearly 1000 male and female students in Catholic and other non-government schools found that girls in single-sex schools had less interest in traditional career choices, particularly when Year 10 and Year 12 students were compared. Conversely, Barboza (1983) could find no evidence that the gender characteristics of schools had any influence on girls' decisions regarding mathematics courses.

Throughout the 1980s research was conducted into the extent to which schooling in Australia was 'gendered', another government report finding that girls and boys were having fundamentally different school experiences and being prepared for quite different post-school options (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1984).

Some British researchers (Harding, 1981; Kelly, 1976, 1981; Shaw, 1976; Ormerod, 1975) claimed that girls in single-sex schools were more likely to choose subjects popular with male students, but this was not supported by Bone (1983), who found that the type and style of school (i.e. private or public, small or large) were more important factors than gender admission policy. Bone (1983) concluded that the most significant variable was whether or not a school was academically selective. Smithers and Collings' (1981) survey of single-sex and coeducational schools in the private and public sectors found no differences in the choosing patterns of high ability girls. Harvey (1984), however, found significant gender differences in the subject choices of third year high school students, concluding that the single-sex environment reduced such differences. In the United States, Lee and Bryk (1986) concluded that,

Whether considering academic achievement...future educational plans, affective measures of locus of control or self-image, sex role stereotyping, or attitudes and behaviors related to academics, we found that single-sex schools appear to deliver specific advantages to their students. The results are particularly strong for girls' schools. (p.394)

A different approach was taken by Walford (1983) who investigated a number of private boys' schools in Britain that decided to admit girls at the same time as the government sector began the policy shift to coeducation. Emphasising that, historically, '[h]igh status education had been provided for the boys and lower status education for the girls' (p.50), he found that some schools filled vacancies in the final year by admitting female students 'after the boys in the fifth form have made their 'A' level choices, so that only girls whose choices 'fit' are accepted' (p.50). While Walford's (1983) study focused on the economic usefulness of schools admitting female students into classes whose numbers were less viable without them, the findings add to the perception of this period as one of considerable disadvantage for many girls in schools generally.

By 1987 the focus on girls' education had led all Australian Ministers for Education to support the release of the *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (MCEETYA, 2000). This policy statement represented a comprehensive investigation of the opportunities offered to girls in schools throughout the private and public jurisdictions. The Policy enshrined the concept of equal opportunity but identified other factors that should henceforth be considered by principals and schools in the design and delivery of educational programs. According to McInnis (1996, p.7), the Policy's statement that 'girls are not a homogeneous group' constituted a 'departure from earlier policy formulations where factors such as ethnicity, economic differences and disability were regarded as additional (not integral) to the understanding of identity formation.'

Criticism of the National Policy included concerns about the actual mechanisms that could facilitate change in government and non-government systems, inadequate consideration of the many factors affecting students' capacity to succeed at school, and a perceived failure to focus on boys' education. In September 1992 a new National Action Plan for the Education of Girls was released by the Australian Education Council, intended to eliminate sex-based harassment and address the needs of girls at risk, reform the curriculum and urge schools to change organization and management practices to improve teaching and learning. According to Foster (1995, p.4), during recent decades 'there [had] been little change in girls' participation in subjects such as physics, higher level mathematics and technology'. Likewise, a

research project commissioned by the Commonwealth Government's Social Policy Group (McInnis, 1996) concluded that,

While girls' school and tertiary education participation rates have improved and girls' collective self-esteem appears to have risen, some of the patterns observed in *Girls, Schools and Society* twenty years ago remain unchanged: subject choices (with their career-enhancing or limiting effects) are still strongly 'gendered', and Australia's labor force remains the most segregated by sex of OECD countries, with women over-represented in lower status occupations and earning, on average, less than men. (p.21)

Both state and federal government publications provide evidence that the 1990s saw a renewed focus on gender in education and a further shift away from perceptions of girls as a unitary, and disadvantaged, group. Education policies began to raise issues of violence, sex-based harassment and bullying, as well as curriculum strategies that would cater for both boys and girls (for example, MCEETYA, 1995; Metherell, 1989a). In New South Wales the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs established a Gender Equity Taskforce, which produced the O'Doherty Report (1994). This report recommended the development of an inclusive gender equity strategy that would assist in identifying 'those things relating to gender which prevent individuals from achieving their full potential' (McInnis, p.30). While the Report emphasised the need for all schools to implement the Gender Equity Strategy, only coeducational secondary schools were assessed as requiring a Boys' Program Co-Ordinator and a Girls' Program Co-Ordinator. There was no reference to the single-sex public high schools.

The new focus on boys' education as part of a reconsideration of gender equity manifested itself across Australia. Since the late 1990s there has been a strong public and research interest in the status of boys in schools. An Australian Government report titled *The Education of Boys* (DETYA, 2000) surveyed schools across all sectors. The analysis of student participation in tertiary-accredited subjects showed that while males continued to have higher enrolments in mathematics and technology, the numbers electing science subjects were almost even. The major gender difference reported in that study was that of all Year 12 students enrolled in tertiary-accredited courses, there were approximately five per cent fewer boys than girls.

In the Australian schools context, some research points to declining levels of achievement among boys relative to those of girls (Rowe, 2000; Rowe & Rowe, 1999; West, 1999, 1998; McGaw, 1996). Other researchers have critiqued the proposition that boys can now be regarded as the new disadvantaged (for example, Martino, 2003; Weiner et al, 1997; Yates, 1996; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Foster, 1995, 1996b; Connell, 1995). Such a shift has raised related questions about the means by which school effectiveness is measured and the extent to which dual discourses of disadvantage identify both male and female students who may be in need of compensatory attention. The DETYA (2000) report referred to earlier in this section emphasises the importance of addressing the needs of boys and girls who do not perform well at school. The report concludes that,

The increasing importance of gender as a factor affecting educational performance in the last decade suggests that there may have been developments which have impacted adversely on boys' learning and development...It is important to remember, however, that many boys do not have difficulties and that boys are as numerate as girls. Those most at risk of underachievement are disproportionately from low SES and indigenous backgrounds, especially those in remote and rural areas. (p.37)

In New South Wales the discourse has focused in the main on the results achieved by boys and girls in the Higher School Certificate (Foster, 1998). In a study of gender in its relationship to post-school outcomes, Foster (1995, p.3) concludes that 'the charge of a serious gender gap is unfounded' as the mean difference in tertiary entrance rankings shows girls have only an eight point lead, and that they have an equal share in the top five per cent of the overall distribution. As will be seen later in this study, there is evidence that some single-sex public schools have appropriated the discourses of disadvantage to present gender segregation as a contributing factor to academic achievement as well as having the capacity to develop a range of other individual attributes.

Concerns about boys' and girls' academic performance are not restricted to Australia. In the United States, there is evidence of a growing interest in the capacity of single-sex schools to enhance academic performance. According to the National Association

of Single-Sex Public Education (NASSPE, 2004), an analysis of students' grades shows that American girls now outperform boys at all levels and in all school subjects. Evidence of this is also provided in Willingham and Cole's (1997) investigation of the relationship between gender and academic performance among students in a range of schools. Riordan's (2002) review of the available research found strong evidence that the academic and developmental benefits of single-sex education were greatest for African-American and Hispanic females from low socio-economic backgrounds and only slightly less significant for males from those backgrounds. No significant difference was detected for white male students or affluent students of either sex or any race.

In England, Elwood and Gipps' (1999, p.51) review of the examination results of girls in single-sex schools compared to those in coeducational schools (both public and private) found that 'the performance of a school in terms of examination results has much less to do with whether it is single-sex or not than with other factors.' The repeated finding among British researchers (for example, Smithers & Robinson, 2005; Gorard & Smith, 2004) has been that the key predictor of the academic success of a school is the ability of its students, irrespective of the gender mix.

A similar conclusion was reached in a study of five Sydney public high schools, of which two are single-sex, two coeducational and one academically selective. Paterson's (2003) investigation of the variables influencing students' academic performance in the last years of high school found little evidence to indicate that gender played a major role. In his view, it is not as significant in Higher School Certificate results as other variables, such as parental background, study skills and the impact of peer groups.

1.5.2 Student self-concept and attitudes towards school

Notwithstanding the earlier point that recent discourses of disadvantage have focused on academic performance, an examination of the literature reveals some studies that provide other perspectives. The relative paucity of such studies highlights this study's contention that the single-sex public institutions have been marginalised in the debate over mixed versus coeducational schooling. In Gill's (2004) view, the research has placed a less than optimal emphasis on non-academic issues as factors contributing to effective schooling in either the single-sex or coeducational model. She maintains that,

Most studies of the effect of school gender context have looked at subject enrolment and academic achievement in the senior years of school as providing indicators of schooling success...A minor theme in research on school gender context...concerns research into student self-esteem, general well-being and social maturity. While there are interesting studies in these areas, they have not been reported to the same extent as studies of student achievement levels and enrolment patterns. (p.83)

Jackson and Smith (2000, p.409) claim that 'England and Australia are two countries where single-sex and coeducational issues remain firmly on the agenda' yet the research focus on the single-sex public schools of New South Wales is demonstrably limited in scope and frequency. The exception is reflected in what appears to be an increasing interest in the strategy of providing single-sex classes in coeducational schools (Yaman, 2002; Snyder, 2002; Jackson & Smith, 2000; Rowe, 1988).

Any discussion of single-sex and coeducational schools necessarily includes some reference to British researcher R. R. Dale (1955, 1966, 1969, 1971), whose large-scale, ongoing studies of both environments were the first to conclude that mixed schools bring measurable social benefits to students generally, and possibly some special advantages for girls.

Philips (1979) surveyed 2000 Sydney students at single-sex private schools and coeducational public schools in an attempt to understand the origins and extent of chauvinist attitudes among boys and the effects of this upon girls' self-esteem. The study found that the girls from single-sex schools had higher levels of self-esteem

than their peers at coeducational government schools, but that boys from single-sex schools had even more stereotyped views of the opposite sex than their peers at government coeducational schools.

Gilchrist (1984), also working in Sydney, surveyed over 1000 students from five Catholic coeducational schools, two single-sex high schools that combined boys and girls for some classes, and two fully single-sex high schools. The findings supported Dale's earlier conclusion that the general attitude of students in the coeducational schools was more positive than that observed in the segregated schools.

Marsh et al (1988) studied the effects of restructuring on two single-sex schools in Sydney that became coeducational institutions. The students' self-concept was monitored throughout the two-year transition period and the researchers found that not only was there no discernible decrease in female self-concept, but both boys and girls reported an increase in self-concept as a result of the mixed environment. The researchers concluded that the coeducational environment has no negative impact on the academic performance of male or female students. A further study carried out by Marsh et al (1989) investigated teachers' perceptions of the effects of the introduction of coeducation on student self-concept and academic achievement. This study found teachers to believe that while coeducation brought social benefits for both sexes, it was not a positive move in terms of opportunities for girls, especially in the areas of mathematics, science, technology and languages.

Jackson and Smith (2000) reviewed the empirical studies of the same two schools, together with those of an English coeducational school that had introduced single-sex classes. Their review of the research to date established the existence of 'confounding factors which make clear-cut decisions in favour of one type of schooling over the other difficult to make' (2000, p.2).

Outside the Sydney metropolitan area, Bell (2002) administered the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to assess the impact of the introduction of coeducation to a former all-boys' private school. The study found a significant drop in self-esteem among the boys and that 'the classroom had become a social place, where the threat

of embarrassment in front of the females added a new complexity to learning and socializing' (p.26).

Ryan (2004) investigated a Catholic boys' school that introduced coeducation initially in Years 11 and 12 and later in all other grades. The study was designed to measure academic performance and students' self-concept among Year 12 students after four years in the upper school. Ryan (2004, p.394) found that 'transition from SS to Coed schooling benefited both boys and girls with no measured academic disadvantages', although there was some evidence that the longer the students were at the school, the better the marks they obtained. With regard to self-concept, the application of the Self-Description Survey (SDQ111) also found that the length of time students had been at the school strongly affected their scores on the Religion, Physical Appearance, Parent and Opposite Sex scales.

The literature from England contains some school-based studies from the decades following the reduction in the single-sex provision. As with the Australian investigations, a higher proportion of the studies involved non-government schools. Cairns (1990), referring to material collected in both countries (for example, Foon, 1988; Lee & Bryk, 1986), was critical of some researchers' tendency to generalise their findings to all schools (government and non-government) and the failure to measure academic self-concept as part of students' self-esteem. Cairns' (1990, p.210) own study of nearly 3000 students at single-sex and coeducational schools found 'segregation along gender lines has no differential impact on the perceived competence or locus of control of 16-year old boys or girls [and] no evidence that attending a coeducational school had any advantages in terms of increased social competence for either boys or girls.'

In the Australian context, Collins et al's (2000) exploration of the post-school destinations of girls and boys determined that the debate over the benefits of single-sex and coeducation declined after the 1980s and that '[d]espite the many confident and popular defences of either of the settings as the superior one or as preferable for girls, conclusions from the research are, at best, mixed and more often inconclusive' (p.99). Their wide-ranging review of the available research found evidence that girls have higher self-esteem in single-sex environments but that this is counterbalanced by

the less pleasant aspects of all-female schooling. Additionally, they cited studies that indicate that single-sex mathematics and science classes in coeducational schools may have benefits for girls experiencing harassment and the challenges posed by ill-disciplined boys, but offer less clear benefits for high achieving boys and girls (Parker & Rennie, 1997). Further significant findings were that 'school type has a greater impact on performance in examination results than whether a school is single-sex or co-ed' (Cuttance, 1995; Leonard, 1995, cited in Collins et al, p.99).

According to Canadian researchers Schneider and Coutts (1982), the underlying assumption of the debate over single-sex versus coeducation has been that there are critical social and psychological differences between the two models and that coeducation carries an instinctive appeal for those who believe it to offer a more socially appropriate environment. Their study of over 2000 students at five coeducational, four all-girls and four all-boys public high schools found that the coeducational institutions were perceived to be more 'gregarious, group-centered, and friendly, more tolerant of non-compliance, spontaneity, and impetuosity, as more conducive to the development of feelings of self-confidence and self-respect, and as reflecting less prejudiced and irrational thinking' (p.904).

While Schneider and Coutts' study stressed that gender-selective enrolment practices may result in significant differences in the personalities of students attending single-sex and coeducational schools, they concluded that important differences do exist between the two environments and that further research was required 'to ascertain whether or not the apparent advantage enjoyed by coeducational students occurs at the expense of academic achievement and the development of other socially desirable qualities, such as a sense of responsibility and self-control' (p.906). During the same decade, Gill's (1988, p.13) examination of Australian schooling led her to suggest that '[a]bove all there is a need to research what is actually happening in girls' schools – and in boys' schools and mixed schools – before answers can be attempted.' A key aspect of my own study is a close examination of what is actually happening in some single-sex public schools in New South Wales.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study was undertaken to investigate a phenomenon in Australian education; namely, the enduring appeal of a large group of single-sex public high schools in New South Wales. The research was guided by other, more specific questions:

- Which schools are they?
- What sustains them?
- How do the schools fit into the provision of public education?
- What does the future look like for these schools?

To date there has been no substantial examination of the single-sex government school provision in New South Wales, nor that of any other Australian public education jurisdiction.

The answers to the research questions have the potential to inform education policy relating to the single-sex government schools and to provide a research-based understanding of the nature and scope of this provision. The results of the study are intended to offer information about the current status of a broad sample of the schools, with particular emphasis on how they operate within a highly competitive education market. The study makes relevant, local data accessible to those who make policy as well as to those who implement it.

An ongoing publicity campaign conducted by the NSW Department of Education and Training has featured the slogan *The Issue is Public Education*. This has been a direct response to the increasing drift of students to the non-government sector, which, as will be shown in this study, reflects increasingly active choosing by consumers *for* some school types and *against* others. Key elements of this are the well-publicised concerns about boys' education and the preparation of both male and female students for the post-school world. In this regard, Wagner (2002, p.9) claims that,

Interest in single-sex education has recently proliferated in the popular press, the education community and the academic and professional literature ... This information may be particularly important for future educational policy, given the context of the current school choice movement.

The study is also designed to give a voice to those who have been associated with single-sex public schools and who see some value in preserving this aspect of the history of New South Wales public education.

I reiterate here that this research project was not designed to make a case for or against single-sex education per se. Instead, the questions were formulated to retrieve historical data and to elicit contemporary understandings that can help to explain the current status of the schools and their contribution to the delivery of public education in New South Wales.

1.7 Background to the research project

1.7.1 Personal experience in New South Wales single-sex schools

In 1983 I was a novice teacher assigned to a government secondary school for girls in Sydney. Upon appointment, I instantly became a participant in the school's conversion from single-sex to coeducation, a process that was to be undertaken over two years. My professional inexperience and lack of preconceived ideas about the implementation of this policy were advantages in the sense that I was also able to observe the change from a relatively neutral stance. In addition, my own secondary education took place in both coeducational and all-girls' schools, meaning that both school types were already familiar.

This initial teaching experience formed the basis for my later postgraduate study of education policy shifts of the 1970s and 1980s. This was a period in New South Wales educational history that researchers argue has left a unique legacy in the sense of 'the gendered nature of educational change' (Goodman & Martin, 2000, p.383). My own study (Mueller, 1987) investigated the attitudes of teachers towards single-sex and coeducational schools, and used surveys and interviews to determine the level of support for the two models as they then existed within the structure of public education.

The current study, completed twenty years later, explores a specific educational phenomenon that has its origins in the policy shifts of the 1970s and 1980s. It is a direct outcome of my professional, lived experience and I cannot claim to be an

uninformed observer. I am very aware of the effect of personal involvement in any change and admit to reservations about the nature and timing of the implementation of the coeducational structure across the public system. However, time and distance have enabled me to approach the archival material and my human subjects with much less sense of my own participant-observer status and much more detached, straightforward curiosity. This work is an attempt to reconstruct the past in a spirit of critical enquiry. It is motivated by a desire to contribute to the current debate over the education of boys and girls and to encourage reconsideration of the role the existing single-sex schools can play in informing policy development.

Reason and Marshall (1987, p.115) suggest that many researchers choose topics that relate to 'our own life concerns.' In this sense, the impact of living through a period of change from one school type to another has been a primary stimulus for my own studies. In applying what McIntyre (1998, p.14) calls 'background understandings', I have come to appreciate what it means to be part of history, which, ultimately, all individuals are. Years of watching and listening to other people's reactions to the implementation of government policies, specifically those relating to single-sex education, have piqued my curiosity about the basis on which school communities accept or reject major change.

One unforeseen, and very positive, outcome has been the realisation of the ways in which my familiarity with the relevant people and places could facilitate the research process. It gave me credibility with potential interviewees and enabled me to make links that might not have been apparent to others. White (2003) provides some inspiration in this regard, emphasizing the need for the researcher to reconcile a familiar phenomenon with his/her own lived experience. Cunningham (2000, p.279) describes this in terms of teachers' day to day lives at school, reflecting that 'in the course of an exchange of lived and professional experience the interviewer as a fellow human being (and often a fellow professional) is drawn into the account, signalling understanding and sympathy, perhaps making comparisons and contrasts to encourage the narrative on its way.'

There is, however, a danger of too close an involvement by the researcher. As Weiler and Middleton (1999) warn,

It can lead to a kind of confessional approach, in which the scholar writes more about herself than she does about that outside of herself which she is trying to know. But a self-conscious consideration of the power and location of the author can also highlight the processes of meaning making and consciousness, and as Leslie Bloom comments, can increase our curiosity about the ways that identity and subjectivity are actively produced both in the lives of researchers and respondents and in the field as part of the research process. (p.3)

Writing from her own experience as a public servant who studied the policy area in which she had once worked, Welsh (2003, p.4) maintains that this dilemma meant ‘striving to maintain objectivity in the process research and constant self-reflection during data collection and analysis in order to avoid undue bias.’ My intention in this research project has been, as Martin (2003, p.219) advises, to use individual stories to discover ‘the revelatory power of historical sense-making.’ This became increasingly significant as the archives failed to yield the necessary details, meaning that there would be heavy reliance on the recollections of human sources.

1.7.2 Teaching practice and policy changes

A relatively recent emphasis on putting teachers back into the story of education has provided timely and useful methodological support for this research project. Cunningham’s (2000, p.273) review of a number of studies involving teachers suggests that ‘a confluence of three historiographical currents has emerged in a fertile stream of studies in women’s history, oral history and the history of teachers.’ All but two of the people interviewed for this project have a teaching background, including politicians and bureaucrats.

The relevance of oral history for this study lies in the potential for key figures from the past to explain the thinking that underpinned the policies that have had a significant impact on today’s educational climate. Their contribution is explained by Cunningham (2000, p.274) who asserts that, ‘[m]any teaching careers are sufficiently long for teachers to experience considerable change over time not only in classroom practice but in state policies, prevailing ideologies and cultural contexts.’

In the 1970s and 1980s, the majority of policy makers, senior bureaucrats and other educationalists came from the ranks of trained teachers. Now retired, these people are in a position to provide some insight into the impact of government policy on schools and classrooms. Inevitably, such a study will produce multiple constructed realities as informants provide their perceptions of past events. However, reflection necessarily requires an understanding of past contexts as well as an ability to evaluate current practice. On what basis are educators and educationists to lead and build if there is no record of the past? Who better to provide a window to the past than those who lived it? Cunningham (2000, p.274) argues that '[t]eachers with a critical grasp of the historical development of their work, of folk memory and of precedent will be in a strong position to question and challenge contemporary constructions of teachers as service providers.'

During my early years of teaching in a girls' school, I observed that very few teachers saw themselves as playing any significant role in the change process, let alone as participating in educational history-making. Some individuals, in a variety of age groups, saw the wholesale introduction of coeducation much more as a bureaucratic decision with inevitable administrative complications that they would be required to manage, than as an educational shift in which they could, or even should, become personally and intellectually engaged. Some felt compelled to conform to new ways of thinking and teaching, regardless of any philosophical or pedagogical views that they may have held. Others still were so intimidated by authority figures, both inside and outside of the school, that they could not consider a challenge to any policy.

A small number of teachers became increasingly concerned about the wholesale implementation of coeducation in a system that they perceived to be numerically and geographically quite big enough to accommodate structural diversity. They questioned the application of the 'one size fits all' approach when, as in the case of this school, the community reflected the differences of nationality, religion, socio-economic status and many other characteristics that were evident throughout Australia and would not necessarily be catered for in the new model. They also questioned whether the new commitment to equity through coeducation was enough justification for eliminating a longstanding, ostensibly successful model and asking students, staff

and parents to take its replacement entirely on trust. The findings of this thesis indicate that the same questions remain relevant today.

It is worth noting that within five years after the girls' and boys' campuses were each converted to coeducational institutions both experienced a drastic decline in enrolments. Both lost significant numbers to local non-government schools, and a nearby single-sex government school for girls became so oversubscribed that prospective students had to be placed on a waiting list. The policy response was to make the former boys' school into a selective high school, which immediately enhanced its appeal and began to turn enrolments around. The former girls' school became the headquarters of a new collegiate, encompassing five diverse schools from around the region.

Choosing to research an area of personal significance may place a greater burden on the researcher to make the story meaningful to others. To the extent that there has been relatively little research interest in the single-sex public high schools, it may be valid to question why this topic merits investigation. Perhaps the desire to fill a gap in the knowledge base is enough justification. I prefer to argue that every student, teacher and interested person has a right to understand what has led to the current educational reality and that the most logical and efficient way to gain such an understanding is through examination of the written records and interrogation of the relevant authorities, both past and present. I also maintain that such a study has the potential to encourage teachers, principals and other stakeholders to engage with the prevailing ideology and to find ways of participating more effectively in the policy making process.

1.8 Overview of the research project

As foreshadowed in earlier sections, this study seeks to tell the story of the survival of the single-sex public schools. The project has its origins in the adoption of coeducation as the model for New South Wales secondary schools. This study, like its predecessor (Mueller, 1987), is based in and around schools and their communities and was designed to elicit data that would reflect the nature and scope of the contemporary provision.

The study evolved along relatively simple lines, based on my determination to investigate the past with the intention of making sense of the present. In order to answer the fundamental research question about the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools, it was necessary to obtain both historical and contemporary data. The parameters of time were always clear. That is, the introduction of the comprehensive, coeducational school model came as a result of the adoption of the recommendations of a former NSW Director-General of Education, Harold Wyndham, in 1957. The Education Act of 1961 which followed Wyndham's report brought the most significant changes to public education in terms of its commitment to making a broad, liberal, secondary education accessible to all. The impact on the traditional approach of segregating by sex and selecting by ability, at least in major urban areas, was profound and provides a logical starting point in NSW education history.

This thesis, therefore, consists in part of a chronological investigation into the post-Wyndham decades, specifically as they featured changes to the NSW single-sex public schools. Historical sources include archival material from government, bureaucracies, parent and teacher organisations and past and present schools. Material has also come from policy documents, parliamentary records, books, magazines, newsletters, letters, newspaper articles and personal files.

Written records were not, however, the only source of historical data. I was determined to use my own teaching experience and contacts to obtain firsthand recollections of the period under scrutiny, at the very least with the intention of comparing official records with personal narratives. A major feature of this study is the attempt to give voice to those who have been involved with the single-sex public schools. The contribution of former principals and teachers, retired politicians and bureaucrats and other key informants thus became an essential aspect of the project. Regardless of their own views on the matter, these participants had a story to tell about the reasons for the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools and were an essential part of the investigation.

The message from the majority of my early informants was that the best insight would come from an intentional linking of past policy with current practice. They emphasised that in order to understand the contemporary provision of single-sex

public schools, it was essential to investigate shifts in the socio-economic and political context. The same informants also emphasised that while the post-Wyndham decades were not ancient history, they were receding quickly enough that many of the key figures would soon not be accessible. This was the major inspiration for the chapter on the evolution of the single-sex public schools, which touches on much of the broader history of New South Wales education.

Other than the restrictions of ethics committees and bureaucratic regulations, timing was not as crucial for the contemporary single-sex provision. While some schools are experiencing a decline in enrolment, there is no evidence that the provision faces any philosophical or pedagogical challenge. It was possible, therefore, to take considerable time and advice regarding which schools to invite to participate, as well as whom to approach.

Time constraints made it important to select schools that would be broadly representative of the whole group, as it was clearly not feasible to visit more than a representative sample of the whole provision of forty-six institutions. The criteria, which are described in more detail in Chapter 2, included geographic distribution around the Sydney metropolitan area, a mixture of boys' and girls' schools, comprehensive and selective schools and socio-economic diversity. I therefore identified schools in each of the administrative regions and approached principals by telephone at first, and then by mail as a follow-up for those who expressed interest in the project. The result was a series of visits to nine schools, with all principals offering their full cooperation and support.

A direct outcome of these interviews was that the umbrella group of single-sex public schools soon divided itself in my mind into the three sub-groups addressed later in this study. The decision to frame the thesis around these groups was subsequently supported by the non-school based informants with whom I consulted. The sub-groups comprise the single-sex comprehensive schools, the single-sex schools characterised by ethnic clustering and socioeconomic disadvantage, and the single-sex schools that are academically selective. These are examined in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 respectively. This work is preceded by a chapter in which the entire provision of forty-six single-sex schools is examined within the context of New South Wales

public education. The combination of historical and contemporary data, I believe, should give this research project strong credibility for teachers, parents and other interested parties.

1.9 A guide to reading the thesis

The structure of this thesis is in line with the general premise of the research project: past events can be used to explain present policy. The thesis therefore follows a chronological pattern, beginning with a broad overview of the provision of single-sex education in Australia as well as those English-speaking countries that have arguably had the greatest influence on local education systems – the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This overview, as already seen, includes some reference to the literature relating to single-sex education produced since the middle of the last century. Further references to the relevant literature are provided in later chapters.

An explanation of the methodological approach used in this study is found in Chapter 2. This chapter stresses the importance of historical data – both oral and written – as a basis on which to build an explanation of how the current context of single-sex public schooling in New South Wales has come to be. The data collection process is described in detail, particularly in relation to the availability of archival material and the reliance on interviews with historical informants.

Chapter 3 provides the historical context for this study. Using the single-sex schools as a lens, this chapter traces the evolution of New South Wales public education as it reflects some of the dominant socio-political and economic trends. Chapter 4 explains why the 1970s and 1980s constitute a critical era in the history of the New South Wales single-sex schools. In keeping with the stated intent of this thesis, the review refers to both archival material and historical informants.

The historical analysis leads into a detailed description of the current provision of single-sex public education in New South Wales. Chapter 5 examines the impact on the single-sex public schools of a highly competitive education market, including the strategies employed by some schools to distinguish themselves from their public and private school peers.

Chapter 6 marks the beginning of the empirical content of this research project. In this and subsequent chapters, the diversity of the forty-six single-sex schools is highlighted through references to the nine sample schools and interviews with a wide range of informants.

The final chapter reflects on the implications for future policy decisions relating to the single-sex public schools.

2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

As already mentioned, many past studies of single-sex schools in both the public and private sectors have compared the effects of gender-segregated environments with their coeducational counterparts. The emphasis of this research project is on a single educational phenomenon: the enduring appeal of single-sex government schools in New South Wales.

This chapter details the methodology chosen for this study. It also outlines the approach taken to the analysis of the data and explains the thinking behind the subsequent presentation of the findings.

2.2 Method

Much of the design of this study was based on my curiosity about the virtual absence of the single-sex public schools from contemporary and historical literature. Perhaps it is simply a matter of knowing how and where to look. In Gough's (2002, p.17) analysis of the missing women of academia (specifically in the areas of philosophy and mathematics), he stresses that the fact that they were shut away behind closed doors 'does not mean, for a moment, that they did nothing.' In fact, they were where one would expect to find them, working away in a range of contexts, most lacking any significant public profile, and 'a great deal of research has to be dedicated to recovering their work in order to be able to evaluate it' (Ainley, cited in Gough, 2002, p.13). I concluded that this was indeed the case with the under-researched single-sex public schools of New South Wales. Although I knew where to find them, there was little historical material with which to orient my investigation into the schools themselves.

I was further, and coincidentally, inspired by the determination of another researcher to 'drag up the past' in order that it not be consigned to silent oblivion (Rushbrook, 2003). As part of a critique of the construction of Australian adult and vocational education, Rushbrook (2003, p.7) maintains that '[t]he process of popular and institutional 'forgetting' suggests that 'remembering' must be actively constructed through time.' The study uses the story of the deaths of twenty-six army engineers

during a training exercise at Kapooka Camp in 1945 to highlight the fact that some pasts are deliberately held on to, ignored, or even distorted, for the sake of 'legitimising contemporary institutional behaviours' (p.1). I also draw on Gardner (2003, p.175) to argue for the inclusion of oral testimony as a way of 'democratizing the production of history.' As already mentioned, the single-sex schools are arguably an example of a school type that has been marginalised in education discourse because of the dominance of a preferred model.

In the case of the single-sex schools, the scarcity of official records as opposed to the relative proximity of the era offered the option of collecting data from a range of participant-observers. In Gardner's view, 'the addition of the voice of the classroom teachers of the past to those of policy makers, trade union leaders and local administrators is easy to defend' (p.175). Likewise, Jones (1994) asserts that good research reflects the collection of material from as many perspectives as possible. For example, '[a] dry, one-dimensional document can come to life in conversation with its author, especially if that conversation opens up means of interpretation not apparent to the reader' (p.182). One very rewarding aspect of this study was the occasional discovery of archival material written by, or in some other way associated with, my own informants and then to be able to speculate about the effect of the passage of time on their thinking.

The major research question is about the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools in New South Wales. The word 'enduring' implies the passage of time, and was deliberately chosen to encourage a focus on the evolution of policy relating to these schools. This motif influenced the methodological design, because of the need to consult historical as well as contemporary informants and to source archival as well as current documents.

Historical records are inevitably incomplete as a statement of context and living informants will always tell a story that originates in their own experience. In this regard, Chen (2002, p.15) explains that, '[a] narrative only makes sense when its corresponding context is defined.' Thus, a variety of factors can allow themes to emerge in ways that might otherwise not be evident from written, or oral, sources alone. A combination of the two approaches, it was hoped, would enrich the process

of enquiry. Kogan (1994, p.76) explains that '[w]e can all try to triangulate accounts from different sources, but in the end we may be able to do no more than present as completely as we can the contrary versions.' Further support for this view comes from those who insist that the past must be considered in any attempt to understand educational policy making, which is 'not to suggest that historical events *determine* current outcomes, but to place current developments – which may appear radical or revolutionary – within a longer-term framework' (Gewirtz & Ozga, 1994, pp.186-7). Thus it also seems reasonable to agree with McHugh (1994, p.64) that 'interviews with a variety of key people undoubtedly help to build up the overall picture'.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a crucial aspect of this project was that the window of opportunity to involve human participants is steadily declining as key figures from the period pass away. Although the 1970s and 1980s cannot yet be regarded as the remote past, the elapse of even three decades has a real impact on the capacity of the researcher to evaluate documentary evidence against the perspectives of key figures, and to a certain extent my sense of urgency in this regard meant that preference was given to locating and interviewing these participants, putting the search for archival material in second place.

It is noteworthy that the data collection process featured frequent, somewhat pessimistic statements from participants (particularly those who held positions in education during the 1970s and 1980s) concerning the loss and destruction of documents, which they attributed to constant bureaucratic restructuring and poor record-keeping. This may also explain why many participants, including some serving school principals, were unaware of the extent and diversity of the single-sex public school provision.

2.3 Data collection

In the interests of efficiency and chronology, the data collection process was divided into two phases. These phases were discrete to the extent that they reflected past and present policy contexts, but intersected with each other because of the common link with the single-sex public school provision.

In the initial phase, a strong focus on oral history was included in order to complement the written records of the 1970s and 1980s. This historical investigation was supported by a second phase, during which interviews were held with principals and other key informants associated with a representative sample of schools. The phases were:

Phase 1 – Written and oral history

- documentary evidence
- interviews with key figures from 1970s and 1980s, including
 - principals
 - politicians
 - education bureaucrats
 - teacher union representatives

Phase 2 – The schools

- principals
- teachers
- education bureaucrats
- parent representatives

Informants were selected and questioned according to the timing and nature of their involvement in education (i.e. principals or bureaucrats, historical or contemporary). There was a strong emphasis on repeatability of the data collection process, in the sense that the same questions could be asked again of any group of informants and would be likely to elicit the same answers. Triangulation was achieved by collecting qualitative data from a wide range of sources, written and oral, over a number of years and making comparisons with material collected from secondary sources, such as newspapers, books and the like.

2.3.1 Archival data

The search for historical material during the first phase was based on the need to understand the origins and evolution of the contemporary single-sex public school provision. Primary sources include archival material from the New South Wales Parliament and New South Wales Department of Education, books, magazines, newspapers, individual school records and other publications, documents and files held by the NSW Teachers' Federation, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations and the major political parties, and personal files kept by informants.

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that this study is partly an attempt to examine past decision-making in education in light of the survival of the contemporary single-sex provision. By definition, such a process depends on access to historical records. One informant, a former teacher and education historian, emphasised the value of recordkeeping.

Basically, in terms of the Department's records, they're fantastically well kept up to 1939, and they sort of deteriorate after that for a whole variety of reasons. Some of which is to do with administrative reorganizations like regions, but a lot more is to do with people throwing them out. The fact that they're in one series up until 1939 has protected those. But there were all sorts of problems from 1940 anyway, for a variety of reasons.

And the tone of the reports became bland in lots of ways, I have found.

What? Ministers' reports and other reports?

Official documents looking at the period I'm focusing on [1970s and 1980s].

Yes. Yes.

Not much of the nitty-gritty, very broad-brush.

But again, that had probably been a long-term trend, which I think applies to a lot of other departments as well. From what I've gathered, my picture of the file-keeping nature of reporting and the level of detail and so on – you know, notions of accountability and of actually writing things down, even writing them down in the first place – I think a whole lot of different departments have a similar kind of history. We used to talk to equivalents to our History Department that used to exist in a whole range of government departments – none of them do anymore – and then later on when there was an attempt to set up a sort of historians' group dealing with public affairs, government departments, public service in NSW. My feeling is that the pattern is quite similar, and has more to do with general technological change, governmental change, changes in public service. It isn't only Education that sees those changes. (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004)

How, then, can the quality and effectiveness of the education policy process be evaluated? If the documentary evidence is inadequate, for whatever reason, how are policy shifts to be explained? One solution, as applied in this study, is to investigate

recent policy history using key informants. Welsh (2003, p.2) states that '[t]he study of recent policy history opens up the possibility of going beyond policy documents and exploring the 'assumptive worlds' of policy makers through interviews, in order to better understand policy motives, processes and action.' It is important to note that all interviewees were also asked to recommend sources of written material. In several cases, interviewees had collected documents they considered useful and offered these to me after the interview. Some former policymakers provided access to historical documents that they had kept in their personal files.

A former teacher and regional director in the New South Wales system also suggested that one of the consequences of constant restructuring of the public education authority was the loss of archival material.

... a lot of it [retention of single-sex schools] was still based on some of these residual ideas about the needs of girls and the needs of boys in terms of separate education, separate qualifications, separate goals.

Did anyone articulate that?

Oh yes.

Was that written down? Was there...where could I find it?

Well, you certainly won't find anything in New South Wales. When the break-the-old-culture theory came in with ministers succeeding Rodney Cavalier, who were determined to cut off people like myself and [former Deputy Director-General] and the others who had experience and knew the system, and who could perhaps offer advice based on that, it all had to be new, it all had to be different, and they were getting rid of our dead hands, you understand. They proceeded to [restructure] the regions, shortly after that, which meant that all the files and archival material and policy documents were lost, and they also destroyed many of the records and documents at Head Office.

So were they physically destroyed?

Yes! (Interview, Guthrie, 2004)

In contrast, at state government level, useful material was obtained from Parliamentary records. Hansard transcriptions of sessions that included Questions Without Notice and Ministerial responses to pre-set questions were of interest because

of their capacity to describe the context in which significant educational change occurred. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, much of the emotion and debate that accompanied the reduction in the number of single-sex public schools (especially in smaller urban communities) is captured in these exchanges. The same is true of old newspapers, particularly those representing Sydney's suburban areas, such as the northern beaches (*The Manly Daily*) and the North Shore (*The North Shore Times*). The archives of the former provide a chronological record of the debate about the real and potential closure of a number of single-sex schools in the area, bureaucratic decision-making processes, community consultation, socio-economic issues and the like.

The official publications of several other organisations and lobby groups offer a range of perspectives on broad educational issues. The library of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation is comprehensive and was made available to me for research purposes. Likewise, archived editions of magazines and newsletters from the NSW Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations provide a guide to the key figures of the past and the manner in which policy shifts were managed.

As far as the single-sex public schools were concerned, however, the bulk of the archival material relevant to this study was found in the New South Wales State Library, the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) Library and the libraries at the University of Sydney and the University of Wollongong. All three libraries were the source of historical material relating to New South Wales education. At OTEN the most significant data came from the alphabetical files established to hold material for every public school in the public system, including those now closed. As will be seen, this research project also draws on this material as it is presented in the Department of Education and Training's official historical guide to New South Wales public schools (*Government Schools of New South Wales 1848-2003*), currently in its sixth edition.

2.3.2 Interviews with historical informants

Tracking the educational developments of the 1970s and 1980s necessitated the collection of data not only from documents but also from individuals who had

authored or were familiar with the official records. Initial participants were identified from archival material and my own background knowledge of the New South Wales system. A 'snowballing' technique was applied in this phase of the study, whereby I identified an initial group of participants and then asked each of these individuals to nominate potential informants. Taylor (2001) successfully employed this technique in her study of the contribution by teacher union activists in the 1970s and 1980s as they campaigned to put gender issues on government policy agendas.

The interview process for this study took place between October 2002 and July 2005. Initial contact with the participants was made by telephone. A letter of introduction was forwarded to those who expressed interest, which contained a package of information about the research project and a list of questions to ensure that participants were well informed. This also gave them the opportunity to ask for further details before interviews were arranged.

Most interviews lasted about 90 minutes. The longest was three hours, when two former principals were interviewed together. A total of 47 hours of interviews were recorded with 17 interviewees. Some of these individuals provided additional responses via email, fax and letter. Eight were visited at home but I met others in their offices or in some mutually convenient location.

On my part, flexibility and a willingness to travel were essential features of this phase. In general, once the interviewees knew my location, they were extremely considerate in terms of the arrangements for meeting. For example, one former Minister for Education agreed to meet in a coffee shop in a New South Wales country town as he happened to be travelling interstate and was much closer to me there than he otherwise would have been. Two informants were interviewed by telephone as their geographical location made a meeting too difficult. One serving politician was interviewed in her office at Parliament House in Sydney.

Prior to the interviews, all historical informants were sent the same list of questions designed to elicit clear recollections of the 1970s and 1980s, as this was the common period in which they had lived and worked as educators and/or policymakers. I hoped that the historical informants would provide both recollections of the past and, given their lived experiences, commentary on the present. The questions were developed on

the basis that if the interview began with a question about the individual's career, the rest would flow. I made it clear in my initial approach to each interviewee that I was interested in his or her particular perspective on the events and effects of an era, and that the questions would be a guide only. The major themes covered perceptions of the status of the schools during the post-Wyndham decades, the basis upon which policy relating to the single-sex schools was made, why some schools have survived and not others, and possible challenges the provision could face in future years.

The questions were designed to give participants a clear sense of the scope of the project and ensure that they could make any preparation they considered appropriate. Many made notes to assist them during the interviews as they were concerned about the length of time that had passed since their active involvement in the field. This showed an earnest desire to get the facts right, and in one case, the interviewee actually spent considerable time away from me looking up dates in a diary. Several were worried about the impact of their age on their memory and asked that I double-check dates, times, places and the names of people.

All interviews were recorded on audio tape and all interviewees were given transcripts of their own interviews to check, which in several cases led to the provision of further details that had been recalled since the interview.

In two cases – a former principal and a former senior member of the Department of Education – the informants replaced their transcripts with new, original summaries which they felt were more articulate and more comprehensive than the interviews they had given. Both enclosed lengthy letters expressing their renewed interest in the subject matter, a direct consequence of the interview process. A list of informants is provided in Appendix B.

2.3.2.1 Researching 'up'

In the first phase of this research project, the main sources of oral history were former politicians and senior public servants. As I had no prior experience in interviewing such people, I approached the process with some trepidation. Although I had completed nearly 20 years of teaching both in Australia and overseas, and had held a

middle-ranking leadership position in a school for some considerable time, I had only recently stepped out of the classroom to undertake some policy work. My earlier research had required peer-based interviews only and I wondered about my ability to manage interviews with influential and high-profile informants.

Fitz and Halpin (1994, p.47) found that such informants maintain a style that reflects their familiarity with research situations, and that this self-confidence 'is perhaps the key challenge of conducting qualitative research with the powerful in elite settings.' Not only are they used to accepting or rejecting requests for access, these people demonstrate that they are used to controlling any interview situation.

In the current study it became obvious that many key figures were experiencing pressure to grant interviews to researchers and journalists, often because of their involvement in non-education matters. For example, one was the chairman of one of New South Wales' leading sports associations and another led a quasi-government organization responsible for work with the ageing. Although I had anticipated this to some extent, it was a complicating factor and made me all the more aware of the need for researchers to have the utmost flexibility.

The question of obtaining access to these people inspired me to consider what is actually involved in researching the policy-making elite. Why would they agree to an interview with an unknown researcher? How could their interest be piqued in the very first instance, when a taped interview would mean little benefit, and possibly considerable inconvenience, for them? After interviewing dozens of former ministers of education and directors of education for a series of books, Kogan (1994, p.71) claims he is still unable 'to divine whether it was an altruistic desire to contribute to knowledge or a narcissistic desire to get into print that persuaded them; it was probably a reasonable mixture of both.'

Walford (1994a, p.3) describes the process as 'researching up'. While educational research is characterised by studies of schools and their communities, relatively little research attention has been devoted to the more recent leaders of the New South Wales educational hierarchy. A notable exception to this, and one that is most

pertinent to this study, is former Director-General Harold Wyndham who has been the subject of extensive biographical analysis (for example, Hughes, 2001; 1999).

In the case of the New South Wales bureaucracy, little relevant archival material proved to be available other than the official reports and presentations one might expect from Directors-General and other key figures. Some have shifted to academic careers or have published their own work in some other manner (for example, Winder, 1991), but few seem to have been the object of biographies. Notwithstanding the obligation of public servants to serve the government of the day, regardless of political differences, it is not easy to ascertain who was responsible for which policies and how they came to be written. This is particularly true of policy relating to the single-sex government schools in New South Wales, which for most interviewees appeared to have been raised for the first time in a research context.

This study therefore focused on the most senior leaders, political and bureaucratic, of the period under scrutiny, hoping that access would be granted and that the results would be useful. Access to one former New South Wales Director-General of Education, whose perspective was most critical to this research because of the period in which he served, at first seemed impossible because of his well-known desire for privacy in retirement. An initial telephone call was successful because I had permission from one of this gentleman's former colleagues, a visiting university academic, to say that he had recommended me to approach him. The consequent interview was one of the most rewarding, both personally and professionally, of all. This informant went to considerable effort to provide the details of other potential interviewees, as well as contacting some of them himself and, as Whitty and Edwards (1994, p.21) put it, 'reassuring fellow heads in the area that our research deserved co-operation.'

The significance of building an enduring network of such informants cannot be overstated. It became important to me to leave every interview in such a way that the participant seemed to feel it was time well spent and agreed to give me any additional assistance that I might need further down the track. This places the onus on the researcher to be diplomatic and thoughtful in all dealings with interviewees, in an approach that Walford (1994a, p.228) calls 'charming the gatekeeper.'

In the case of this research project, the historical context meant that most of these key figures had been professionally and personally known to each other. I became aware that although this was an advantage in terms of the snowballing effect, and in terms of supporting my requests for access, it also meant that some informants communicated with each other about my methods and work to date. They were often frank about this and the importance of establishing one's own bona fides each time did not diminish, but rather meant that some meetings began with 'So you're Fiona. Yes, [informant] told me he/she saw you last week. What's your background again?'

There was also a very practical element to the data collection process. My own location in regional New South Wales prevented easy access to both archival holdings and human subjects. At first, I felt I had to pursue every angle and personally visit every possible source of information. Over time, and after driving many thousands of kilometers, I learned to reflect more deliberately on the overall aims of the project and assess the potential of an individual's contribution, balancing these with the time and effort involved in arranging an interview, forwarding all of the necessary documentation, getting to and from the chosen venue, conducting the interview, and transcribing and mailing the record of interview. Accordingly, I decided to contact some people by telephone and make notes of the discussions. Like the notes made during chance encounters in schools or other locations, these were then transcribed and used with the written permission of the informant.

Some informants developed expectations about the interview and found that their understanding of the purpose of the research project was not reflected in the questions. This applied to a very few who did not read the information package that was sent to them and assumed that the research was intended to make a case for or against single-sex education. Some time was then needed to reorient the discussion and the subsequent interviews were successful. Some were either highly critical or very supportive of the role that their former colleagues had played in the policy-making process. In the main, however, the informants were generous with their time, supremely hospitable and rarely reluctant to answer questions. All were good talkers and all were persuasive and engaging. I left many of these interviews feeling that I had learnt a great deal more than I had anticipated, and not only about single-sex education policy.

An exploration of who and what influenced educational policy-making several decades ago necessarily meant approaching individuals who were often long since retired, had moved away from the metropolitan area, were less mobile or were experiencing the illnesses associated with ageing. It soon became clear that they all relished the opportunity to recall and discuss their particular involvement in education – not one request to meet with a former policy-maker was refused. While these informants were unanimous in their stated desire to ‘set the record straight’ or ‘fill in the gaps’ there was no indication of self-aggrandisement, unlike the experience of Whitty and Edwards (1994, p.27) who found that many senior company employees were ‘keen to claim their place in history.’ However, it is important to note that some potential informants did not return my calls or respond to suggestions from other informants. They made a choice without talking to me, which was their prerogative.

Like Ball (1994, p.98), I found that ‘interviews with the retired and “out of office” were often more revealing, interesting and frank than those with incumbents.’ These participants felt far less constrained and were more likely to be critical of their own efforts or those of their government or organization, particularly as all were former teachers and evidently felt genuine anguish at policy failure. Another reasonably common aspect was their desire to explain their own actions and for these to be held accountable.

However, each interview was also a reminder that, as Ball (1994) explains,

Political interviews are themselves highly political. In many, but not all, cases, the interviewee has specific aims for the interview: to present themselves in a good light, not to be indiscreet, to convey a particular interpretation of events, to get arguments and points of view across, to deride or displace other interpretations and points of view. (p.97)

Some participants described other sessions with researchers who had either made no effort to prepare or treated them poorly in some way. A heavy reliance on interview data requires the researcher to develop a relationship with all participants, despite knowing there may never be another personal encounter. It demands an investment in the whole interview exercise that will elicit the depth and volume of information that are sought.

Walford (1994a, p.225) stresses that researchers must be well prepared for interviews, especially with powerful subjects, because these people assume that relevant homework will have been done and 'are prepared to question the interviewer and to demand explanations as to why particular questions are being asked.' An example of this came at the very beginning of the data collection phase, when one key informant, a former politician, was loquacious and welcoming but had very definite ideas about how the interview should run.

Looking back at your time in office between 1984 and 1988, what issues or developments would stand out to you?

I find this a very hard question to answer. In the years immediately after 1988, I used to get asked it all the time and I would say to the interviewer, as I say to you with respect, it was a Mickey Mouse question.

I need to be teased by way of an actual question. I have detailed diaries and in recent weeks we have cleaned out a four car garage which moved several cubic feet - several cubic metres - of files over and above those which are in the Mitchell Library and over and above those that were in an upstairs archives room. So to try and talk about what was an overwhelming issue is just impossible. (Interview, Cavalier, 2004)

The slightly antagonistic tone of this early exchange does not reflect the subsequent conversation. As the relationship between researcher and interviewee developed, more penetrating questions were asked and rewardingly 'thick descriptions' were provided (Geertz, cited in Gilbert, 1996).

Walford (1994a) refers to the intimidation that researchers can feel in the presence of the powerful, and how difficult it can be to ensure that the meeting achieves more than a general discussion. Similarly, Ball (1994, p.96) suggests that 'interviews with political actors highlight the struggle both to control the event and to control meanings.' My own experiences constantly reinforced the need for maximum flexibility. At times the interview would begin with the first question but deviate almost immediately because of unforeseen, but nevertheless relevant, input from the respondent. As Walford (1994a, p.227) has noted, it is unrealistic to restrict such a range of personalities and sources and it is 'generally not possible or desirable to pose

a set series of questions to those with power, because it is the depth of understanding that they can give through their individual knowledge that is of greatest importance.’ Given the key roles played by the historical informants in this study, they were asked for their permission to be identified. Several wrote highly supportive, personal notes regarding the nature of the project. Sadly, one participant passed away before the completion of this project and another became too ill to participate.

It soon became apparent that each interviewee had a unique story to tell. Thus, it became a question of balancing the need to get answers to the set questions whilst retaining the capacity to pursue new angles. The loosely structured nature of the interviews proved to be appropriate for the collection of oral history, acknowledging the tendency for each conversation to develop its own momentum. This approach was most successful in terms of eliciting recollections from retired bureaucrats and principals. The questions used to guide these interviews can be found in Appendix C.

2.3.3 The schools

In order to balance the history of the single-sex provision with an understanding of the existing schools, it was essential to include data from the contemporary institutions themselves. The purpose of the second phase was to investigate their status and operations as a sub-group of public secondary schools in New South Wales.

Nine schools, nearly one-fifth of the total number, were chosen from across the Sydney metropolitan area. The main reason for this was pragmatic: only one school is located in regional New South Wales and there were limits to the number and range of trips I could undertake. Although the final list ultimately depended on the willingness of principals to become involved, the schools were targeted to reflect a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds as well as geographic location. As nine of the forty-six single-sex schools are also academically selective, one boys' school and one girls' school were selected from this sub-group.

Table 2.1 shows the types of secondary schools that are currently responsible for delivering a comprehensive curriculum in New South Wales. The Central Schools (mainly catering for Years 7-10) are not included in the table as they have no single-sex variants. For the purposes of this study, however, they are counted in the total number of high schools when the single-sex schools are considered as a proportion of the public secondary provision.

See print copy for figure 2.1

2.3.3.1 A sample of nine single-sex public schools

Background material on the entire group of forty-six single-sex public high schools was collected over a period of several weeks to ensure a broad base of understanding of the single-sex school provision before approaching principals. This material included annual reports, enrolment application forms, school newsletters, brochures and information packages, and any other documents made available to the public on request by individual schools. Additional material was obtained by logging on to each school's website, where one was in place, and printing out hard copies of any relevant items.

As mentioned in an earlier section, considerable background information was located in government and university libraries. This enabled the collection of historical as well as contemporary data, although the quantity and quality were by no means consistent. Generally speaking, the schools with the highest profiles, such as the older selective high schools (several of which had closed well before the commencement of this study), had attracted the greatest media attention and had themselves produced a

large quantity of historical material. Some of the schools' files had only one or two newspaper clippings or, in two cases, nothing at all.

This material was placed into alphabetical files by school name. It enabled the instant retrieval of data such as enrolment numbers, subject offerings and analyses of Higher School Certificate results. This system made it possible to update the files on a regular basis, especially as increasing numbers of schools established personalised websites (hosted by the NSW Department of Education) and made updated information available. The most significant aspect of this was being able to observe the changes to each school's unique statements about its nature and role within public education. Using this material, it was possible to consider the specific features of every school before determining which ones to contact for research purposes.

School 1

School 1 is a comprehensive boys' high school located in the northern suburbs of Sydney. The school population is predominantly working-class and Anglo-Saxon, with about 15 full fee paying students from Asian countries and a slightly smaller number of students of Afghan, Lebanese or other Middle Eastern background, out of a total of just over 600. The majority of students come from within 30 minutes drive of the school. About 50 travel an hour or more each way by train from the Central Coast. The principal considers the school's access to the train line to be a definite advantage but says that a significant number of families from certain primary schools choose a different high school because of the current transport policy, whereby some students are entitled to bus passes and others to train passes, depending on where they live. The school's major competitor is a Creative Arts High School. Enrolment at the twin school for girls stays at around 300 students higher, despite drawing from the same area.

School 2

School 2 is a comprehensive boys' high school located in a coastal area of Sydney. With just over 400 students, the campus is one of five that combine to make up a secondary college. It draws from an affluent area that includes 21 feeder primary institutions and competes with a very wide range of other schools, including selective government high schools, Catholic and other non-government schools. Approximately

one-third of all secondary students in this area attend non-government schools. This school faced closure due to falling enrolments in the late 1980s but was successfully defended by its community.

School 3

School 3 is a comprehensive girls' school located in Sydney's north-western suburbs. Drawing almost exclusively from the local, relatively affluent middle-class population, the school has nearly 1400 students and has waiting lists for every year group. Some students come from low-SES backgrounds and receive student assistance. A significant number of students, possibly over 15 per cent, come from strongly Christian families, which is reflected in the very large numbers attending lunchtime religious study or meetings at the school. The school is within reasonable distance of four coeducational high schools, one comprehensive girls' school, and a number of Catholic and other non-government schools. It has a very strong Old Girls' union and a tradition of advocacy for girls' education. The DET asked the principal to reduce the schools' numbers from 2005 as it has a large number of demountable buildings and is deemed to be above the optimum size. The school has a partnership with a comprehensive boys' school, which involves some SRC work and a biennial musical production. The boys' school has about 300 fewer enrolments.

School 4

School 4 is a comprehensive boys' school located in Sydney's inner west. The school's enrolment of 1200 students puts it at maximum capacity and it has a waiting list. Its sister school is located in the same area and has about the same number of students. Over 85 per cent of the school's population was classified as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB), with a very varied mix of Asian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Tamil, Bangladeshi, Arab and Islander students. Many families moved to the area specifically for the purpose of enrolling at the school and a majority of its students commute from outside the immediate drawing area. It has a strong academic tradition and the principal is committed to supporting boys in terms of understanding how to study and participation in all state and national competitions. Sport is also a successful feature of the school.

School 5

School 5 is a comprehensive girls' school located in Sydney's outer western suburbs. It has a very mixed population of over 1000, with a high concentration of Muslim students and about 20 other nationalities represented. Over half of these students travel considerable distances to get to the school, a feature of its location near a major business district and a declining number of families in the immediate vicinity. The school is one of many of its type that claims to have made a successful conversion from a domestic science focus to one that emphasises an academic tradition. This school is heavily oversubscribed but the principal refuses to import more portable classrooms until the NSW DET agrees to upgrade the school's facilities.

School 6

School 6 is an academically selective boys' secondary school located in the northwestern part of the Sydney region. With 720 students, the school is at its official ceiling but has the capacity to take up to 900. About 56 per cent of the boys are from non-English speaking backgrounds, and of these about 70 per cent are of Chinese heritage. The rest come mainly from Indian and Sri Lankan families. Although many of the students travel long distances to get to the school, from areas such as the Blue Mountains and the western suburbs, most come from the local area. In the early 1990s, the school's leaders and community were in favour of a change to coeducation but this was overtaken in 1994 by the DET's decision to designate it as a selective school. Its sister school is also academically selective and is located within ten minutes drive. About 95 per cent of the school's graduates go on to tertiary education.

School 7

School 7 is a comprehensive boys' school, located in the southwestern suburbs of Sydney. It has an enrolment of about 320, of whom approximately 88 per cent are of Arabic-speaking backgrounds. The number of Pacific Islander and Indonesian students is increasing, and there is a small group of African students as well as a few students from Asian countries. Built for 1200 students, the school was nearly 100 per cent Anglo-Saxon in the 1950s and then became Anglo-Greek through the 1970s as a reflection of immigration patterns. Its sister school, located a few kilometers away, has more than double the enrolment.

School 8

School 8 is an academically selective secondary school for girls, located in Sydney's south. Enrolment is at capacity with over 900 students, and there is a waiting list. The girls come from all over the Sydney metropolitan area and many travel long distances. On the basis of academic achievement, the principal says the school ranks fifth among all New South Wales secondary schools, with 98 per cent of its graduates receiving their first choice of university places. It has a longstanding relationship with a single-sex, academically selective boys' school that is within a short driving distance and has about the same number of students. The school's Old Girls' Association is active and extensive.

School 9

School 9 is a comprehensive girls' school located in Sydney's southwestern suburbs. Its enrolment of about 650 includes a majority of students from Arabic-speaking backgrounds and a minority of Islander girls. The principal says the school struggles with an image of being the last resort for poor families and is no longer attracting those local primary students who score in the upper 30 per cent of Basic Skills tests, demonstrated by the fact that they choose private, religious schools, other single-sex girls' schools nearby or selective government schools further away.

2.3.3.2 Interviews with principals

The role of the principal has been affected by the devolution of many responsibilities that were once held by education authorities. While the central bureaucracy retains control of matters such as staffing, infrastructure, and curriculum development and support¹, individual schools have increasing autonomy with regard to developing strategies that will meet the needs of their communities. Principals were also interviewed because of their decision-making and leadership roles within the schools, their key function within the wider public education system, and their representational obligations outside the school. One school leader who has pioneered initiatives in boys' schools and is currently the president of the NSW Principals' Council says that,

The critical influence on the very nature of these schools [is] the Principal. We have this substantial and I suspect unresearched capacity to infect our schools and this has

¹ The curriculum authority is the New South Wales Board of Studies. However, the Department of Education and Training is responsible for the delivery of all programs through public schools.

massive implications for anything we embrace, such as gender equity issues ... or anything we choose not to embrace. (Bonnor, 1995, p.47)

In this second phase, principals were contacted by telephone and those who expressed interest received an information package containing a description of the research project, a copy of the formal permission granted by university and bureaucratic ethics committees, and the list of questions I proposed to ask (see Appendix D). After an appropriate period, the principals were contacted again to discuss arrangements for a visit to the school. At this stage, I made it clear to principals that the interviews were likely to vary somewhat as a result of the diverse nature of the schools and the background and personality of the principals.

The questions for principals differed from the questions asked of historical informants in that there was an obvious emphasis on the present and, depending on their age and careers, not all principals would be able to provide a perspective on past policy developments. I therefore resolved, once again, to employ a loosely structured approach to each interview, with the questions to be used as a guide only. All interviewees were asked about their professional backgrounds, their views on single-sex and coeducational environments, and the policy context in which their schools now operate. The questions also addressed the status of their schools within and outside the public system and the implications of this for marketing and enrolments. Principals were also asked about their perceptions of links between research and practice, specifically in terms of the extent to which they and their schools were involved in current educational discourse and policy-making.

This phase illustrated the sensitivities involved in what Whitty and Edwards (1994, pp.20-21) refer to as 'negotiating access to schools' and the importance of giving potential participants the 'opportunity to evaluate our pedigree.' It proved to be more difficult to convince principals to grant research access than it had been to get former policy-makers to speak. They, too, are under varying degrees of pressure to grant access to researchers. In the case of the single-sex, selective schools, it became clear that they are in demand from researchers because of their academic, rather than their gender selectivity.

The principals of one selective boys' school in the inner north, one comprehensive girls' school in the northern beaches areas and a comprehensive girls' school in the eastern suburbs all declined to participate on the basis that they already had too many requests from researchers. I became aware that some school principals generally felt overburdened and that some had adopted a blanket policy of refusal. I did not use my own contacts to pursue these as I wanted to be sure that all participants were true volunteers and would be genuinely committed to the project.

Once again, however, the value of the snowballing technique was demonstrated. At the end of every interview, principals stated their willingness to contact other principals on my behalf or to allow me to use his/her name when making an approach. It became clear that the principals who actually took the time to read the information package subsequently found the project to have value and agreed to the interview on the basis of intellectual curiosity and a desire to contribute to research in this area.

Some principals clearly regarded me as more worthy of their time and more credible because of my own teaching background in New South Wales single-sex schools. My knowledge of the New South Wales public system and acquaintance with individuals within it were tested by most principals in some way as they (diplomatically) teased out my motivations and level of understanding of what they believe to be the major issues surrounding education generally, and single-sex education in particular. As I had hoped, the principals who agreed to be interviewed came from a very broad range of educational environments. Almost all had had previous experience in other single-sex schools and were able to make system-wide comparisons. All were unreservedly welcoming and in most cases had clearly prepared for the interview by collecting statistics, discussing the interview questions with others and putting together material that could provide additional perspectives. A profile of the principals is provided in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 – Profiles of the principals

School type	Same sex as school students	Attended single-sex school	Previous experience in single-sex schools	Advocate of single-sex schools	Advocate of selective schools
School 1 (boys)	yes	yes	no	yes	no

School (boys)	2	yes	no	no	yes	no
School (girls)	3	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
School (boys)	4	yes	no	yes	yes	no
School (girls)	5	no	no	yes	yes	no
School (boys)	6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
School (boys)	7	yes	yes	no	no	no
School (girls)	8	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
School (girls)	9	no	yes	yes	no	no

This was authentic field research, characterised by multi-site interviews in natural settings. In three cases, I had planned to spend the usual two hours at the school (including arrival, setting up, conducting the interview and undertaking a brief tour) but ended up staying over half a day. In one case it was a full day because the principal had arranged for five other members of staff to be interviewed in turn. All but one principal offered refreshments and at four schools both morning tea and lunch were forthcoming. All principals either personally led me on a tour of the school grounds, pointing out aspects of historical significance, or delegated another member of staff to do so. Several principals commented that they appreciated the chance to reflect on their practice and that they were intrigued by the research project because it identified a group of schools within the public system that normally attracted attention only because of the academic successes of the selective schools or an incident that attracted the attention of the media.

This second phase of the research project also involved interviews with individuals associated with education but either in non-teaching roles or in other organizations such as teacher and parent organisations. Eight such individuals were interviewed, all as a result of suggestions from principals.

This sub-group of interviewees included a regional director, a cultural liaison officer, five leading teachers from different schools who had all previously served in at least two other single-sex schools, the principal of a coeducational school and two representatives of parent organisations. Their responses were collected by whatever

means proved to be most convenient, including taped interviews, telephone conversations and written responses to set questions, provided by email or letter. These contacts provided additional perspectives on the nature and role of the single-sex schools, particularly in terms of their history. For example, the regional director had also been a principal of several schools and was well known throughout the Sydney metropolitan area. He provided a large amount of documentation to assist in understanding the south-western Sydney region, as well as identifying which branches of the education bureaucracy could provide other data. The senior teachers were all interviewed because of their long term involvement in single-sex schools (i.e. throughout the period under scrutiny in this study, the 1970s and 1980s) and their capacity to reflect on the impact of policy shifts at school level.

2.4 Data analysis

Both the collection and the analysis of data were closely guided by the overarching question regarding the enduring appeal of the New South Wales single-sex public school provision. The analysis of the data had two aims: to identify emerging themes in response to the research questions and to triangulate the material wherever possible. To that end, sub-questions served as a mechanism for sorting the data.

- Which schools are they?
- What sustains them?
- How do the schools fit into the contemporary provision of public education?
- What does the future look like for these schools?

This was particularly useful for analysing the data from written sources. A review of the literature and other documentation was conducted with two purposes: to ascertain the nature and extent of studies conducted in New South Wales single-sex schools specifically for the purpose of researching the mixed and segregated models, and to clarify the nature and history of the debate over the two models since the introduction of mass public education. Although interviews with historical and contemporary informants were the primary research strategy in this study, the data collected from written sources was an important supplement and element in the triangulation process. Secondary data was collected from schools and this was analysed in combination with newspaper articles, books, magazines, journal articles and similar documents. While

the material collected directly from schools was kept separate in preparation for the interviews with principals, the overall emphasis was on bringing together material that dated to the same time period(s) and on identifying emerging themes relevant to the history of the single-sex schools in New South Wales.

2.4.1 Analysis of interviews

The analysis of interview transcripts was managed via a three-step process. First, the transcripts were divided into groups according to the type of participants, as follows:

- Group 1 – Historical informants
- Group 2 – Schools
- Group 3 – Other participants

The material collected from interviews was categorised under headings that represented the key questions asked of informants. Such headings included ‘Historical data’, ‘Decision-making processes’, ‘Critical era for single-sex schools’ and ‘Comprehensive public education’. These headings were matched against the data collected from documents and other archival material.

Emerging themes were then clustered as a result of searching for key words and phrases within informants’ responses. Examples of these included: ‘single-sex schools policy’; ‘research-based decision-making’; ‘differentiation’; ‘gender segregation’; ‘selective’; ‘comprehensive’; ‘rural-urban divide’; ‘discrimination’; and ‘equity.’

This process was manual, with tables devised to record all references under relevant headings. I also constructed a system of colour-coding to ensure that all references could be located quickly within and across the original transcripts. The analysis of oral data was undertaken after much of the literature search had been done, but the contribution of archival material cannot be understated. A key outcome was the recognition and confirmation of not simply what had been found, but also what was missing from the records.

The analysis was guided by the major research question: why have the single-sex schools endured? It was also characterised by constant cross-checking and

triangulation of the data, as was the intention from the outset. Although I considered the use of data analysis programs such as QSR.Nvivo, which had been recommended by some of my peers, it became obvious that the constant reading and re-reading of the transcripts was useful because of the diversity of the subjects and the importance of becoming absolutely familiar with their particular characteristics.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the second phase (school visits and interviews with principals) was a turning point in terms of my identification of three sub-groups of single-sex public schools. In addition, an invitation to speak at a conference in the United States (NASSPE, 2nd Biennial Conference, October 2005), as well as the earlier requirement to present at a university colloquium, provided opportunities to refine the work of this research project.

3 The origins of the New South Wales single-sex public schools

New South Wales has historically enjoyed a far more diverse state secondary school system than the other states. (Senator Mitch Fifield, Parliament House, Canberra, 2004)

3.1 Introduction

Earlier sections have presented the single-sex provision as a longstanding manifestation of differentiation in New South Wales public education. Given that the purpose of this study is to investigate the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools, an appreciation of their historical background was essential. In this chapter, the recollections of key historical informants combine with archival data to trace the evolution of this educational phenomenon. This material also provides the context for the following chapter, in which the focus is on the decline of the single-sex provision during the 1970s and 1980s. An understanding of the policy shifts that led to this critical era in the government education system is important when considering the appeal of the single-sex schools that remain.

3.2 1788: Colonial schools

Examined from the perspective of gender-segregated schooling, there is considerable evidence to indicate that sex-based differentiation in education has been a characteristic, even an aim, of the New South Wales public system since the arrival of the first British colonists. For example, according to Hayes (1998, p.7), '[s]chools provided differently for girls and boys from the time a colony was established in NSW until the 1970s.'

No official provision was made for schooling the children of the white settlers who reached Australia in 1788, nor was there any notion of education being the responsibility of the state (Barcan, 1995). The sons and daughters of more influential members of the new colony were likely to be educated, according to custom, by the mother, if she was literate, and by tutors and governesses imported to the country for that purpose (Wills, 2004).

Gender-specific expectations of sons meant that they were more likely to attend English boarding schools from an early age, giving them the opportunity to continue their studies beyond the elementary level. Girls from affluent backgrounds pursued activities at home that were designed to ready them for their futures as wives and mothers. The events of the next fifty years support this study's assertion that a highly differentiated provision has long been the norm in New South Wales education. As will be seen, there is evidence that consumer familiarity with the single-sex school alternative may help to explain the enduring appeal of public institutions that admit boys or girls only.

Records of the First Fleet refer to 17 convicts' children and 19 offspring of British Marines as having survived the journey (Austin, 1961). No official interest was expressed in the scholastic welfare of these minors for some time, reflecting an inherently conservative belief that it was 'safest for both the Government and the religion of the country to let the lower classes remain in the state of ignorance in which nature had originally placed them' (Austin, 1961, p.2).

Given the early lack of concern for the education of the colony's children, it is not surprising that the first New South Wales schools were private academies of varying quality and scope. In the main, these were established for the children of free settlers and intended to keep their children insulated from undesirable influences. In her investigation of early school facilities in New South Wales, Kyle (1986, p.22) maintains that the private school was designed to reinforce the role and status of the socially elite, and that for girls it provided a means of defining 'the values and bounds of acceptable femininity.' Some evidence points to female ex-convict Isabella Rosson as the first to open such an institution in New South Wales (Smart, 1977). For the purposes of this study, it is important to emphasise that elementary schooling did not come under government authority for many decades, exacerbating the differences in access to, and the nature of, formal instruction across social strata and between the sexes.

In the early days of settlement the close relationship between the government and the established religious bodies dominated educational discourse. Although formal education was nominally under the jurisdiction of the state, the Church of England

was perceived to have a special prerogative in the schooling of children and took practical responsibility for its delivery (NSW State Records, 2000). The Catholic Church provided for its members in a similar manner. A recent history published by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2003) gives some idea of the unique Australian context of public schooling.

Had the colony established in New South Wales in 1788 followed British precedent, the education of the “lower orders” would have been left entirely to the churches or other agencies. In a struggling convict settlement, however, voluntary resources were inadequate for such a task, and from early in the colony’s history the governors granted State assistance, especially to the Church of England, to establish and maintain schools. (p.6)

It is logical to conclude, therefore, that the introduction of any semblance of an educational program for the ‘lower classes’ was to ensure adherence to the nature and practices of English society. However, the remoteness and small size of the new colony had unique implications for the development of any educational provision. The desperate poverty and lack of opportunity that characterised many children’s upbringing appear to have stimulated some early notions of schools as civilising influences. Austin (1961) claims that,

Even if the early governors had wished to ignore the condition of the colony’s children they could not have done so, for the children were under their very feet; in a settlement which still failed to muster 5000 souls in 1800, there was no escaping one’s responsibilities ... Not only were they moved by the misery of the convicts’ children (for they were essentially humane men) but they realized that the future of the colony had to be built upon these very children. (p.4)

A somewhat condescending but nevertheless earnest statement from the Governor’s secretary in 1797 referred to ‘the need to separate the innocent children from their vicious parents’ (Collins 1995, cited in Barcan, 1995, p.26).

Successive New South Wales governors argued for funds to purchase land, build rudimentary schools and pay teachers’ salaries. By 1809 the case had been made to the War Office for the appointment of regimental schoolmasters. This gave some children access to schooling but as the process was unregulated and dependent on the

availability of facilities, a continued supply of money and suitably qualified teachers, none of which was readily available, the delivery of formal instruction was highly inconsistent (Austin, 1961).

Selzer (1994) nominates the Female Orphan School as one of the first public institutions to cater only for girls, its charter being to prepare them to earn a living in domestic service. The opening of this school in Sydney in 1801 reflected a class-based distrust of women without social standing and the notion that such females needed institutional supervision to keep them from moral danger (Kyle, 1986). It is arguable that elements of this have percolated through the centuries to the contemporary girls' schools – both public and private – where there is a strong emphasis on personal safety and individual accomplishment as attractive aspects of gender-separate schooling (see Chapters 5 through 8). Notably, no equivalent school for boys was opened until 1819.

By 1820 the Colonial Government had undertaken to fund all pupils on a per capita basis, with the money distributed to schools by senior clergy. Catholic children attended schools run by their religious orders. Church of England schools catered for other students, and small private academies opened their doors to anyone who could afford the cost. All of these institutions charged fees. Differentiation of education by religious faith became a feature of the period. The creator of the controversial Church and School Corporation, Thomas Hobbes Scott, who was to be the first Archdeacon of New South Wales, argued that religion and education were inseparable, and that land should be set aside to ensure that 'the Established Church would then be in a position to exercise its traditional functions' (Austin, 1961, p.11). By 1826, in an arrangement with the Colonial administration, all non-Catholic schools were placed under the control of the Corporation. The few non-denominational schools in existence also charged fees, meaning many children still had no access to formal instruction.

Opponents of the Corporation objected to the concept of huge amounts of money and land being reserved for one religious entity. For example, Sir Thomas Bourke, a more liberal governor than his predecessors, wrote in 1833 that he 'would like to observe that in a New Country to which Persons of all religious persuasions are invited to

resort, it will be impossible to establish a dominant and endowed Church without much hostility' (Austin, 1961, p.32). In 1836 Bourke proposed a system of schools that would 'bring together children of all sects for a general, literary education which, while Christian in spirit, was undenominational' (p.33) and would not allow the unrestricted use of the Bible, but instead introduce standardised textbooks, including a book of *Scripture Extracts*. This first attempt at a state-wide provision was rejected outright when the Protestants united to oppose an approach they believed to be against the teaching of their doctrine (NSW Department of Education, 2003).

To some extent, this lack of consensus reflected an inter-class tension inherited from the mother country. Educational practices in the early colonies took their lead from British upper class notions of philanthropy and evangelicalism, whereby the schooling of the poor was intended 'to prevent the spread of democratic ideals and social unrest' (Windschuttle, cited in Kyle, 1986, p.3). According to Kyle (1986), much of the work done during this period originated with upper class Protestant women, whose influence came via the churches, benevolent societies and, somewhat later, the state. A key distinction between the education of the lower classes (particularly girls) and that of their middle class counterparts lay in the commitment to producing well-trained workers from the former group who would be economically productive and present no intellectual challenge to the social order. The separation of the sexes was a key feature of this form of social engineering, providing evidence that, as one historical informant noted, 'the Victorian era of thinking in relation to the sexes persisted well into the last century' (Interview, Buchan, 2004).

In this highly differentiated structure, both denominational and non-denominational schools were funded on a pound for pound basis, with schools relying on additional fees and support from families. Approximately half of all school-age children had no access to formal instruction because both denominational and non-denominational schools were frequently established in areas with higher populations and few existed in more remote areas. In 1840 the Church and School Corporation collapsed after years of mismanagement and the failure to achieve consensus among key stakeholders (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003).

In the same year, Governor Sir George Gipps wrote that religious, financial, social and geographic factors should not be obstacles to the delivery of schooling to all. In

his view, '[t]he great dispersion of the population of New South Wales renders perhaps more than in any country upon earth, a system of education necessary, that shall be as comprehensive as possible' (cited in Austin, 1961, p.38).

This period may be regarded as contributing some early notions of standardizing education for the children of New South Wales. Gipps (cited in Austin, 1961, p.39) argued against differentiation on any basis, at least in the early years of schooling, claiming that a sound education for all children 'can best be effected by accustoming them to receive in common the first elements of instruction.' This plan was rejected by both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic clergy. However, in 1844 a select committee recommended the introduction of the Irish National System 'in an attempt to reduce the number of unnecessary schools and provide them where they were most needed' (NSW Department of Education, 2003, p.7).

3.3 1848: The early state schools

Despite considerable opposition to the Irish National System, in 1848 Governor FitzRoy appointed a Board of National Education (NSW Government Gazette, 1848, p.23). The new system of National (state) schools slowly gained acceptance. As the governor wrote,

The general feeling now seems to be that no other system can be so advisable for our vast pastoral district where the population is... scattered, and of various religious persuasions. (FitzRoy, cited in Austin, 1961, p.46)

One compromise on FitzRoy's part, which served to increase the degree of differentiation in early colonial education, was to allow the continued existence of the denominational system. Both church and state schools were supported by government funds and were effectively in competition with each other. This remains the case in New South Wales today, wherein public and private schools receive funding from both state and federal sources.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the New South Wales public primary schools delivered a basic elementary education and required the enrolment of a minimum of 30 children, with places open to both sexes. In recognition of the

dispersed nature of the population, this number was reduced to 25 in 1867 (*Public Schools Act 1866*) and 20 in 1880. Evidence of differentiation between male and female students comes from school records indicating that boys and girls were taught in separate classrooms or schools, and that the wives of schoolmasters, usually untrained, were responsible for instructing the girls in a narrower range of subjects than was true for the boys (Burton, 1840, cited in Kyle, 1986). To avoid duplication of services, such schools were not intended to be established in areas where Anglican, Presbyterian, Catholic, Wesleyan or other non-government facilities already existed (NSW Department of Education, 2003).

By 1850, the colonies of New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania all had Boards of Education . One of the Boards' most onerous tasks was to deliver educational programs across vast geographical areas. By the mid-1860s, each of the colonies had a dual system of education: one to administer public schools and one with jurisdiction over the non-government schools. During this period the Catholic Education Office was established as a separate entity.

This era also saw the opening of the Fort Street Model School on 1 April 1850. This school's charter was to provide public primary education as well as host the first Teacher Training School (Dunlop, 1968). The Model School was located in William Street, a main road in the heart of Sydney, and in its first year enrolled 140 boys and 216 girls in the elementary grades. By 1873 demand was so great that enrolments were restricted to 500 in both the Girls' and Boys' Departments.

One response to the increasing number of older students was to offer secondary subjects at the primary schools. A further differentiation was the design of new post-primary facilities. Fort Street provides the best example. As secondary offerings were added, the Model School became increasingly unsuited to older students and in 1911 the Boys' and Girls' High Schools were officially formed.¹ The schools rapidly developed a reputation. As one historical record states,

¹ As will be seen, this followed the establishment of the first six purpose-built single-sex public high schools in New South Wales.

Fort Street Boys' High School occupies a position in education that is unique in New South Wales; because the history of Fort Street is virtually the history of education in this State... The story is told of Mr. F. Bridges who stated that "there is hardly a place in the British Empire where you will not find an old boy of Fort Street" and there is more truth in that statement to-day than when first stated by Mr. Bridges. (NSW Department of Education, 1952, n.p.)

It is arguable that not only was sex segregation still regarded as a desirable norm in the immediate post-Victorian era, but the high prestige of the two schools also precluded any public critique of the provision. Evidence of their perceived social and educational status is found in a history of the girls' school, compiled in 1972 for the then Minister for Education. Additionally, when single-sex schools were threatened with amalgamation and closure in the early 1970s, the Save Fort Street Girls' High School Committee produced a detailed report, which described Fort Street as a 'pioneer school of state education' and noted that 'hardly a day goes by when an Old Fortian cannot read in the paper news of the success of an Old Girl' (Fort Street GHS P&C Association, 1972, n.p.). As will be demonstrated in later chapters, the association of single-sex facilities with academic selectivity and success has been a longstanding feature of both public and private secondary education in New South Wales.

3.3.1 Rationalising education across the state

The enduring appeal of the contemporary single-sex schools can arguably be traced back to the fact that most schools practised some degree of differentiation by sex. While the origins of the surviving single-sex schools can undoubtedly be linked to the Model Schools structure described earlier, the contention is that the people of New South Wales became familiar with gender segregation in schools, particularly in the major metropolitan areas.

Attempts to rationalise and standardise primary education did not address the question of differentiation by sex, arguably because traditional practices had entrenched a model that separated boys and girls under the same school roof. However, the 1866 *Public Schools Act* aimed to make both the cost and delivery of New South Wales education more efficient. A key stipulation of the Act was that all denominational

schools should provide at least four hours of instruction per day in subjects other than religion. The funding of educational facilities continued to be shared with local communities which, until 1875, were required to contribute at least one-third of the capital costs towards their public schools.

Since most schools consisted of a hall or one or two 'great' rooms, boys and girls were generally educated in more or less the same physical space but Victorian ideas of moral behaviour, combined with a belief in different outcomes for boys and girls, reinforced the delivery of separate lessons for males and females and what Wills (2004, p.62) refers to the 'strict demarcation between the "girls' side" and the "boys' side"' in the classroom. Where numbers were small, the children were often divided within the room, with courses differentiated during the day. As schools grew in size, separate classrooms were allocated to boys and girls. Gender-based modification of some aspects of the curriculum, such as mathematics, science and literature, was also practised in many schools.

As education was not yet compulsory, many children left school by the age of 12, or earlier if they could begin to earn an income. Young people in the more remote country areas frequently had only intermittent instruction via Provisional or Half-Time schools or had no access to education at all. As enrolments increased, public schools refined the differentiation of the curriculum by designating the girls' and boys' streams, as in this case:

Balmain Public School (ps) 2.1860-3.81; Superior Public School (sps) 3.1881-12.1912; School with primary and secondary departments (p+) home science [girls] 1.1913-5.32; commercial school or department [boys] 1.1913-12.45; Central School 1.1946-12.59; Public School [co-educational, primary only] 1.1960 – (NSW Department of Education and Training 2003, p.26)

From 1867, the Orphan Schools enrolled students who had been committed to government care. Although these were publicly funded institutions, established by state legislation, their day to day operations were frequently guided by the views of religious evangelists and philanthropists. The earliest single-sex schools cited in the New South Wales Department of Education's records are variants of the Orphan School model such as the Newcastle Industrial School for Girls (1867-1871) and Biloela Industrial School for Girls (1871-1887). The Regulations for the Newcastle School stipulated that 'a portion of every day, except Saturday and Sunday, [be] devoted to teaching the girls some branch of useful industry and especially all the duties of household management' (Industrial Schools Act 1866, p.1).

3.4 1880: The Public instruction Act

The 1866 Public Schools Act did nothing to diminish the debate about the future of education in New South Wales. During the last decades of the nineteenth century the controversy continued over how and by whom education should be delivered. Although Austin (1961, p.181) warns against imagining that all of the protagonists fitted neatly into categories, he describes this as the 'last phase in the struggle between Church and State over the control of education.' The introduction of the Public Instruction Act of 1880 is said to have resulted from the efforts of those who 'represented the complete liberal position' (The Reid Group, 2003, p.1). Despite persistent objections from the Catholic Church, this Act extended the provision of public education and established what was popularly named one of the 'free, compulsory and secular' Acts (Barcan, 1995; Austin, 1961). The Act created the Department of Public Instruction, put an end to State funding of denominational schools and made attendance compulsory. It did not abolish fees. In New South Wales, as in each of the colonies, much of the funding for public schools continued to come from the central government.

The new legislation had many highly vocal detractors and their objections portray ongoing support for traditional differentiation by class, gender, financial status and other factors enabling clear social delineation. According to Meadmore (2001, p.115), the realisation that such an educational philosophy meant putting all children together 'was too radical a position for them to contemplate.' Support for the legislation came from those who saw a centralised, fiscally accountable state system of education as the appropriate way to deliver education across great distances. This view rejected denominational education as inefficient and incapable of providing equal treatment for all children.

It is interesting to consider the connection between the Public Instruction Act of 1880 and the educational changes that would occur in the following century as a result of the *Report of the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales* (Wyndham, 1957). The Act of 1880 carried legislative authority to enable greater access to public education as well as to develop post-primary opportunities for the state's children. Similarly, Wyndham's report was the vehicle for increasing access to a standardised secondary curriculum and reducing differentiation in the public provision. It claimed that the earlier Act 'reflected a change in the socio-economic pattern of the community and recognised a growing, if sporadic and ill-defined, demand' (p.12). Likewise, the 1957 report was commissioned in response to predictions of significant increases in the student population as well as changes in socio-cultural norms. It is noteworthy that while the origins of the single-sex provision lie in the earlier legislation, a direct consequence of Wyndham's report was to reduce the number of these schools.

The Public Instruction Act (1880) also provided the basis for the centralisation and bureaucratisation of education in New South Wales (Campbell, 2003). The essence of these changes was the decision that although the federal government supplied the bulk of education funding, the state would take financial and administrative responsibility for public schools. For the first time, an organ of the government, supervised by a minister, was required by law to distribute funds in a manner accountable to the regulations of each colony. Enrolments in government schools had increased by 25 per cent in 1880, by 17 per cent in 1889 and by 1900 the Department of Public Instruction counted 2,800 schools in its purview.

3.5 1883: The first government high schools

In 1883 the Minister for Public Instruction oversaw the opening of the first stand-alone, government secondary schools in New South Wales. These institutions were designed to admit both boys and girls but to keep them apart for lessons. One explanation for their introduction under the Public Instruction Act of 1880 is that the establishment of such institutions in Sydney and in the regions to the north, south and west of the city showed the government's determination to resist religious intolerance and domination (Dunlop, 1968).

Apart from the clergy's concerns about inadequate religious instruction, other opponents of public secondary schools included those who considered them a luxury and did not want to contribute to the new provision via taxation. Others feared the loss of the traditional supply of industrial workers and the creation of a class of people who would be socially alienated from their parents (Whiteman, 1972).

The government defended its position in 1921 at the official opening of the new Sydney Girls High School² campus. According to an article written for a departmental publication at the time,

The Minister stressed the features of the democracy of high school education, entrance to which no money could buy. Merit is the only key that unlocks the door of the High Schools. (*Education*, 1921, p.8)

The wider significance of this legislative empowerment of the government system is mentioned in records from one of the earliest schools where it is written that,

The foundation of Sydney Boys' High School, in conjunction with the Sydney Girls' High School, and concurrently with the establishment of High Schools at Bathurst and Goulburn, marked the dawn of secondary education in New South Wales. (NSW Department of Education, 1943b, p.1)

² Some references to the single-sex schools will show the apostrophe in the name (e.g. Bathurst Boys' High School) The NSW Department of Education and Training's current convention is to write the name of the school without the apostrophe but where the reference is a direct quote or from an historical source, the school's name is reproduced as it was written at the time.

The new high school model was underpinned by practices that had something of a deterrent effect. As part of the premise that the new secondary schools offered an academic pathway straight to university, both male and female students had to pass a competitive examination in order to be admitted. Although at first glance the process may have seemed more equitable, the admissions system was evidence of continuing differentiation on the basis of sex. Girls were both less likely to complete primary school and have fewer opportunities to study subjects that would prepare them for the secondary entrance examination (Kyle, 1986). In each district a board of examiners included the heads of schools and a district inspector. For boys the entrance examination covered Reading, Dictation, Grammar, Arithmetic, Algebra, Euclid and Latin. The girls' examination had similar content but instead of Euclid and Latin there was a paper testing their knowledge of French. It is therefore arguable that while the early single-sex high schools offered increased academic opportunities for both boys and girls, the outcomes remained fundamentally inequitable because the female version of the curriculum did not constitute a recognised pathway to tertiary study.

The academic stream reflected differentiation all the way from primary schooling to tertiary level. The University of Sydney opened in 1851. Male students began to graduate in 1855, most having completed their post-primary education with private tutors. While official policy allowed the admission of women, they could only attend classes and were unable to complete a qualification. The first females to receive degrees were arts students Isola Thompson and Mary Elizabeth Brown, who graduated in 1885. Both women had graduated from high schools in New Zealand. They were followed in 1888 by a female scientist, Fanny Hunt, and in 1893 by the first women to achieve qualifications in medicine, Isa Coghlan and Grace Robinson (Turney et al, 1991).

The new model of secondary education, which also required the payment of relatively high fees, was placed in direct competition with the Superior Public Schools where fees were low. The Superior Public schools, which by this time offered both primary and secondary tuition, became 'de facto High Schools and many of their pupils sat for and passed the university entrance examinations' (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003, p.9). Of the six earliest purpose-built high schools, only two were to survive, as shown below:

- Bathurst Boys High School (October 1883 – June 1887)
- Bathurst Girls High School (October 1883 – December 1998)
- Goulburn Boys High School (October 1883 – September 1886)
- Goulburn Girls High School (October 1883 – September 1886)
- Sydney Boys High School (October 1883 -)
- Sydney Girls High School (October 1883 -)

It seems that the onus on parents to subsidise their children's education, together with the lack of support from the New South Wales colonial administration, accounted in part for the closure of the Goulburn schools in September 1886. According to Kyle (1986) a further cause was active campaigning against the girls' school by the teacher of the local superior public school. She also maintains that entry to the state high schools, especially for girls, was restricted to wealthier families and that some such institutions survived only because they discounted the costs of tuition and boarding. Notably, Goulburn had two private grammar schools at the time, which may have attracted more boys than the state alternative.

An undated Department of Education³ document lists the names of the nineteen members of Bathurst Boys' High School's foundation class.

The same record explains the reasons for the school's closure, concluding that,

Unfortunately neither Goulburn nor Bathurst Boys' High Schools were sufficiently patronised in those early years to warrant their continuance. Prior to the advent of State High Schools, secondary education was partly provided in both the towns mentioned by private academies; these institutions retained a large amount of sympathy, and public choice inclined towards them. Furthermore, the Entrance examination to the State High Schools was regarded as severe, and there was a general impression that the schools were an innovation that would not endure for any length of time. (NSW Department of Education, *Bathurst Boys' High School*, n.d.)

Another historical record also referred to the tenuous beginnings of the single-sex high schools, recording that,

³ The official designation of the public education system has changed several times since the introduction of the Public Instruction Act 1880 changed the Council of Education to the Department of Public Instruction in that same year. This was followed by Department of Education (from 1915), Department of School Education (from 1989) and Department of Education and Training (from 1997). The relevant name is provided for each document cited, depending on the period in which it was produced.

The great things expected of secondary education were not forthcoming for many years after the first high schools came into existence. It was not until 1911 that definite progress became evident, and that [only] after the removal of high school fees and more liberal distribution of secondary education facilities throughout the country. (NSW Department of Education, 1943b, p.2)

The 'more liberal distribution of secondary education facilities' referred to above was dependent on population clusters. When a colonial settlement was large enough, separate Boys' and Girls' Departments were established in the primary schools. In the same manner, the new high schools typically opened with two schools sharing the same site. The recollections of a former student at Sydney High School formed the basis for Dunlop's (1968) description of the early school.

The Boys' High School was allotted the ground floor and the Girls' School used the upper floor. Only the senior forms had rooms of their own and makeshift rooms for the lower forms were improvised by erecting dividing curtains which could be drawn back when a school assembly was held. (p.9)

The two schools shared the building for nine years, but had separate administrators: Mr Coates was Headmaster of the Boys' School and Mrs Garvin (nee Wheatley-Walker) was Headmistress to the female students.

The students' physical proximity did not mean the cessation of gender-oriented differentiation. Girls in rural areas had some advantages because fewer resources meant limited subject choices and, at least in theory, that they had access to the courses that qualified students for matriculation into university. However, as social attitudes frequently meant that parents withdrew their daughters from school as soon as they were old enough to work, in both rural and urban areas female ambitions were generally restricted to domestic duties and traditional gender-oriented occupations. While the selective high schools as well as some private schools were able to design curricula that reduced the emphasis on needlework and cookery, the state high school was regarded as an ideal venue for training in the womanly arts. According to Rodwell (2000, p.71), any attempts to introduce or increase such offerings 'were usually met with opposition from wealthier parents who saw the subject as only having point and purpose for working class girls who needed to be educated in matters of race motherhood.' Housework was associated with the lower classes and a

great deal of bourgeois rhetoric emphasised the association between working class families and poor domestic standards. One New South Wales Inspector of Schools wrote in 1902 that country girls should receive instruction in domestic science because it was 'likely that these girls will spend their lives among gum-trees and never see anything more mind-lifting beyond them' (p.71).

The strict division of schools by gender and vocational or academic type from 1913 had a far greater effect on the education of girls than on boys, arguably providing some of the basis for the rejection of single-sex schooling later in the century. In Kyle's (1986, p.120) view, the practical and ideological separation of male and female students was directly associated with the inability of educators to accept the notion of widening socio-economic opportunities for women, meaning that 'the ideal of domestic education for women was raised to absurd heights.'

Concerns about the potential for women to lose interest in the domestic sphere if they were presented with too many options outside the home also found expression in the eugenics movement. It seems clear that much educational planning during the first half of the century was based on a vision of 'Australian women...thriftyly managing a home and family of numerous healthy children in order that husbands could find a healthy refuge from urban commercial and industrial life' (Rodwell, 2000, p.79). Such long term gender stereotyping, reinforced by the education system, may be regarded as a major reason for some philosophical rejection of the single-sex school alternative per se during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

There is evidence of some acknowledgement of educational inequity during the early years of the last century, although this appears to be less concerned with gender-based outcomes than with the inconsistent curricular offerings and differentiation between rural and metropolitan schools. The Knibbs-Turner Report of 1903-04 emphasised the lack of co-ordination between primary and secondary education, recording that,

At the present time the state of preparation of the average students on entering the University leaves much to be desired and valuable time is frittered away and opportunity wasted by the necessity of imparting elementary forms of knowledge which should have been acquired in the secondary school. (Summarised report, cited in Wyndham, 1957, p.15)

The report proposed changes for country areas, in particular, because of the longstanding inequities resulting from unequal population distribution and concerns that the curriculum did not meet the needs of rural children. Evidence of the continuing differences between country high schools and those in the city was provided in a school gazette, which concluded that,

In the closing years of last century, the State high schools were in their infancy and their purely academic curriculum may well have been one reason for their slow acceptance in country districts. Even the more popular superior public schools of the period included no formal courses in agriculture in the curriculum, and when Peter Board introduced his new district Schools in 1904, one of his aims was to widen the curriculum by including vocational subjects appropriate to rural districts. (Dunlop, 1965, p.117)

Some tentative ambitions regarding educational opportunity based on talent were also expressed in the Knibbs-Turner report.

The ideal aim of secondary and higher education in a State such as this will, of course, tend rather toward the establishment of an aristocracy of intellect and character, than to the maintenance of an exclusive caste founded upon birth or wealth. (Summarised report, cited in Wyndham, 1957, p.16)

According to one historical informant, who recalled his experiences as a student and a teacher in the New South Wales system during the first half of the twentieth century, public education remained distinctive in its selection by gender as well as ability, and continued to differentiate between city and country schools.

We didn't even talk inclusiveness. The structure that was set up by Knibbs and the outcomes of the report were for very separate, boys' structures, girls' structures: the boys – commerce/technology and the girls – domestic science. For high school it was a case of boys' and girls' high schools being generally separate for the gifted kids who were all given the opportunity to go through to the Leaving Certificate but selected on a very small basis.

Of course, there were two models. There were always two models. The country model was different because of costs and funds and demographics. You could not run separate schools so those schools were always co-ed ... on a single campus you could run a whole pile of strands – a girls' strand, you could

run a boys' strand, a slow learners' strand, an academic strand. The co-ed model was almost exclusively a country model. The policy, therefore, survived right through until somebody decided in the post-war period that you could bring co-education to the city, as the suburbs were expanding and the suburbs of Sydney were expanding dramatically. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003)

In 1906 the introduction of the Free Education Act finally abolished fees in primary and superior public schools, providing further incentive to parents to register their children for formal instruction. Nevertheless, further differentiation of New South Wales education occurred as an extensive, multi-faceted primary/secondary structure developed alongside the new high schools. The Superior Public Schools, or super-primary schools, referred to earlier, grew out of the original Public Schools, but offered both primary and post-primary education. Their lower fees and standard curriculum offerings kept them strongly competitive with the new high schools, as well as with the private sector (NSW Department of Education and Training 2003). This may explain why, with the exception of the two Fort Street schools (1911), Kamballa⁴ (1912-1974) and Hurlstone Agricultural Boys High School (1912-1978), no other dedicated high schools were established between 1887 and 1913.

3.6 1911: The expansion of secondary schooling

In the years leading up to World War I, much research was undertaken to determine how best to implement new ideas in education. The government's commitment to increasing participation at secondary level was reflected in the abolition of these schools' fees by 1911. Apart from being an admission that the high schools needed strategies to compete with other schools, this also drew attention to notions of schooling appropriate to the new century, specifically in terms of preparing young Australians for the workforce.

According to one historical record, '[i]t was believed that New South Wales required a workforce in four major areas: the professions, commerce, industry and the home' (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003, p.10). Further, each of these occupations could be linked with a particular type of person, who could be identified by the age of about twelve. Some fields were restricted to females and many to males

⁴ This community care school replaced the Biloela Industrial School for Girls. It was known as the Parramatta Industrial School for Girls until 1912 and the Parramatta Girls Training School until 1974.

only, as can be seen in the provision of separate Commercial, Technical and Home Science campuses.

The introduction of formal examinations leading to the credentials of Qualifying Certificate (end of primary school), Intermediate Certificate (two years of High School) and Leaving Certificate (five year courses at High School) cemented the value of formal schooling, particularly since it was impossible to continue to tertiary study without the maximum academic qualification.

From 1913 the government education system virtually ensured different outcomes for children based on their sex as well as early assessments of their ability. Students who did not perform adequately in the academic stream were directed to pre-vocational schools, which were adapted from the Superior Public Schools to become Commercial Schools (mainly for boys) and Domestic Science Schools/Home Science Schools for girls. Such was the differentiation of the curriculum that at Macarthur Girls High School, established in 1930, female instruction in household management was undertaken in a purpose-built mock-up of a family home.

Unprecedented expenditure on new educational facilities was reported in 1913 by the then Minister for Public Instruction, who stated that,

Never before in the history of the Department was such activity shown in connection with the erection of new schools and the remodelling of old buildings as was done in 1913 ... New South Wales deservedly occupies a foremost position in the struggle for educational progress and I am confident that the State will maintain during 1914 the same rate of progress that has marked its policy during the past three years. (Carmichael, 1914, p.12)

The geographic distribution of the schools provides evidence of ongoing differentiation between the sexes and between rural and metropolitan areas. The majority of new campuses were located in the Sydney metropolitan area, where separate facilities were established for boys and girls wherever possible. Between 1912 and 1920 eleven high schools were established in rural New South Wales, all of these coeducational in nature and nearly all building on earlier Superior Public, District or Intermediate High schools. One exception came in 1922, when Yanco

Agricultural High School was established as a boys' high school at Leeton. This school was made coeducational in 1992.

Table 3.1 shows the geographic distribution of schools established in 1913, the first major expansion into single-sex government secondary schooling. Only one school from this group (Sydney [Boys] Technical High School) remains in operation as a single-sex boys' high school, unchanged in name since its foundation.

See print copy for table 3.1



The schools established during this period frequently underwent more than one metamorphosis. Many ultimately reverted to a primary structure. Some examples are as follows⁵:

- **Albion Street** Botany Street Public School 1.1883-4.1884; Albion Street Public School to 3.1901; Superior Public School 3.1901-12.12; Junior Technical School [boys] 1.1913-12.23; Public School 1.1924-12.24; Infants School 4.1927-12.60
- **Marrickville** Public School 8.1864--3.1888; Superior Public School 3.1888-12.1912; Junior Technical School [boys] 1.1913-12.1948; Home Science School [girls] 1.1913-12.1928; Girls Intermediate High School 1.1929-12.1953; Public School 1.1954-

The purpose-built, single-sex high schools that have survived from this period are:

⁵ These details are reproduced from the NSW Department of Education's entries in the publication *NSW Government Schools 1848-2003*.

- North Sydney Girls High School (1914 –)
- North Sydney Boys High School (1915 –)
- St George Girls High School (1916 –)

Thus it can be seen that for the first six decades of the 20th century, successive New South Wales governments presided over a system of secondary education that separated boys and girls into Commercial Schools (1913-1948), Home Science Schools (1913-1962), Junior Technical Schools (1913-1962), Intermediate High Schools (1912-1977), Junior High Schools (1930-1976) and High Schools (1883-). The diversity of the New South Wales system increased with the rise in secondary enrolments, and the rural-urban differences remained. In the Sydney metropolitan area and larger regional centres, separate campuses were provided for boys and girls in most cases. In country areas, smaller populations and a greater acceptance of mixed classes at primary level were key factors in the development of a coeducational system in the higher grades.

The first purpose-built domestic science high schools were located in Canterbury, Sydney and Manly, giving access to young people across the western, central and northern beaches suburbs. One of these was Willoughby Central Domestic School, where the compulsory subjects included cookery, home management and hygiene, and electives offered economics, shorthand and typing. Notes in NSW Department of Education and Training (1999) archives explain that, '[i]n the 1950s, emphasis on comprehensive high schools and changing attitudes towards the education of girls resulted in the conversion of these schools into comprehensive girls' high schools.' Under the heading 'Some Notes From The Principal' an edition of the school's official publication reveals some of the attitudes towards girls that persisted into the next decade.

Parents are asked to insist that girls go home immediately after being dismissed from School. We have been informed that some girls are frequenting milk bars⁶ and behaving badly. (*Willoughby Girls High School Gazette* No. 11, 1 October 1961)

A relatively slow expansion of post-primary education occurred in the period between the wars and in the years immediately after World War II. Table 3.2 shows the

⁶ The contemporary equivalent to 'milk bar' is a coffee shop or café.

number of single-sex schools established in the Sydney metropolitan area and in regional New South Wales over a thirty year period.

See print copy for table 3.2



There is evidence that the gender-oriented differentiation of the curriculum continued regardless of the fact that boys and girls were schooled on the same campus, although the extent to which this occurred clearly depended on the available resources. The experience of one country high school illustrates the tension between the pedagogy of the day and the capacity of the school to differentiate the curriculum for the sexes. An official history of the school (Murwillumbah High School 2004, p.3) records that,

By 1918 there were 340 students at Murwillumbah and of these 58 were secondary students. For the first time Murwillumbah students sat for the Intermediate Certificate. The secondary course for both boys and girls was commercial, but there was also a partial domestic science course (including cookery, laundry and sewing) for girls. Owing to lack of staff, First and Second Years were combined for all subjects except mathematics. This arrangement was not proving satisfactory as it “overloaded the girls and retarded the boys.”

Murwillumbah became a full coeducational High School in 1929.

The decades after 1911 saw an expansion of the system in a manner that recent documents refer to as 'chaotic' (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003, p.12). Depending on where students lived, post-primary education was available at District, High, Intermediate High, Junior Technical, Commercial, Home Science, District Rural and, from 1944, Central Schools.

However, a 1914 government report referred to the system's high degree of differentiation in positive terms, stating that,

Public education is now co-ordinated from the Infant School to the University. Our Primary Schools are also definitely linked by means of junior technical schools and trades schools with

higher technical education, and there remains now only the institution of agricultural or farm schools to complete one of the best co-ordinated systems of education in the world. ... New South Wales deservedly occupies a foremost position in the struggle for educational progress. (NSW Legislative Assembly Report, 1914, pp.30-31)

Another description of the multiplicity of schools and courses is provided by an historical informant who was in the system between 1930 and 1936.

I attended what was then the biggest primary school in the southern hemisphere, from grades one to six, and that was at Bankstown Primary School, which had a school population of over 2000, and had the boys separate from the girls. It was a super primary, in that it also had grades seven and eight. And some of the students went on, the girls doing commercial subjects and the boys doing trades-type subjects. But one sat for what was called the QC – Qualifying Certificate – to pass into the secondary classes, or to qualify to go to one of the Intermediate High Schools up to Intermediate Certificate level, or to a full high school. (Interview, Buchan, 2004)

An extract from a report on Riverside Central Domestic Science School reflects the social and educational norms of the period.

The designation “Domestic Science” school does not give a full conception of the purpose of the school. In addition to continuing her general education and receiving instruction that would prepare her to take control of domestic duties in the home a girl may obtain instruction designed to give her a foundational knowledge for a business career. Among the various subjects taught there are economics, bookkeeping, business practice, accountancy, shorthand and typing. Through the domestic science course a girl may gain admission to the Teachers’ College to train as a teacher of Domestic Arts, or she may qualify for entry to the nursing profession, the Public Service or the City Council. (NSW Department of Education, 1934, p.1)

The separation of boys and girls at secondary level resulted in demonstrable disadvantages for female students (Hayes, 1998; Willis, 1989). The curriculum was offered along traditional lines and did not allow girls to matriculate unless they attended an academically selective high school, such as Sydney Girls High School (1883-), North Sydney Girls High School (1914-), St George Girls School (1916-), Fort Street Girls High School (1911-1974) and Hornsby Girls High School (1930-),

all located in the Sydney metropolitan area. Only two schools outside Sydney offered the same opportunity: Newcastle Girls High School (1929-1975) and Maitland Girls High School (1884-1986). One former teacher remembers that these schools ‘had retention rates of well over 90 per cent, offered a range of courses in the subjects that led to a matriculation, and were staffed by the cleverest and best-educated women of their generation’ (Interview, Guthrie, 2004).

The New South Wales provision expanded in both curricular scope and the total number of institutions, reflecting in part the rise of a new middle class, professional population. The creation of an Australian federation in 1911 also encouraged notions of democratic participation in the nation’s economic and social opportunities, all of which slowly came to influence the delivery of compulsory schooling. However, as Barcan (1995, p.33) insists, it was still possible to ‘make one’s way in the world without much education’ and until the 1930s the majority of Australian children left school by the age of fourteen. Apart from the small size of the state high school provision, another major hindrance was that access to these schools depended on satisfying academic selection requirements at the end of the primary years.

Students seeking an education in some country areas saw less of a distinction than their city counterparts. According to Campbell and Sherington (2004, p.6) ‘[i]n rural New South Wales the local high school in the major regional centres was often more comprehensive in selection and also coeducational in form.’ A female graduate from a country high school, who went on to become principal of several girls’ schools in Sydney, describes the differences between city and country institutions.

I went to co-ed schools all the way through, going from country town to country town. I started in West Wyalong and came to Sydney and then went to Condobolin and Parkes and did my Leaving Certificate in Bega. I got where I wanted to go, you might say. I really thought my education was fine. But when I went to girls’ schools [as principal], and as things changed – and I mean in the 70s, with the women’s movement – I was beginning to see that perhaps I was just fortunate in the schools I’d been in. (Interview, Harris, 2004)

Another former principal of both coeducational and girls’ schools observes that gendered education extended to sport.

Well, I'm a country girl, co-ed schools right through as far as my own situation was concerned. There was discrimination, of course. I played cricket with the boys. I was the wicket keeper but when it came to the team going to the nearby town, I couldn't be in the team. We really just accepted that at the time; that was just life. Didn't think much about it. (Interview, Fleming, 2004)

3.7 1950s: Academic and non-academic pathways

Differentiation in education was explicit not only between boys and girls, but within groups of males and females. In a manner not dissimilar to the distinctions made between boys in the Junior Technical Schools and their counterparts at high schools, the academic and career potential of female students was determined by the school they attended. One former teacher who experienced the pre- and post-Wyndham eras explains that,

At the Girls Home Science High School at which I began teaching [in 1951] some of the 1000 students, only 15 per year could matriculate because only that small group was offered a course in Mathematics which led to matriculation. When I moved to its replica in Newcastle in 1953, no girl from that large school of many able girls could matriculate because of curriculum limitations. (Interview, Guthrie, 2004)

As is the case today (see Chapter 7), enrolment records provide evidence of students being willing to travel long distances in order to attend academically selective single-sex schools. According to a former NSW Director-General of Education, for students who lived outside metropolitan Newcastle, Maitland and Sydney, travelling to these areas was the only means of gaining access to matriculation courses until later in that decade (Interview, Swan, 2004). May's (2001) study of forty male and female high school graduates investigated the implications of being selected to attend a rural, academic secondary institution between the 1930s and 1950s, including the examination process, their preparedness for the transition from coeducational primary schools and the social significance of such an experience. None of that study's informants referred to the single-sex nature of their high school, because, May (2001, p.30) suspects, '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.’ This portrayal of the era is supported by an historical informant, who notes that,

When I was a child it was assumed you would go into a boys’ or girls’ department. When I started teaching at Berala Primary in 1957 there was a boys’ infants department, boys’ primary, girls’ primary and so on. And they had very little to do with one another, almost no contact between ourselves and the girls’ department. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003)

From the late 1950s most state governments were required to manage a massive expansion of the secondary school system. Post-war immigration brought unprecedented numbers of European settlers to Australia, of whom many were families with children and a majority chose to settle in New South Wales. The obligation to house and support the new arrivals as well as cater for the domestic post-war population increase was accompanied by the demand for more and better educational facilities (Campbell, 2003; NSW Parliament Hansard, 1961).

3.7.1 Post-war expansion of public schooling

Differentiation in New South Wales public education manifested itself not only through the provision of various types of schools, including the single-sex models, but also in the provision of a limited number of academically selective high schools. In the decades after World War II this distinction slowly began to decline, as ‘[s]econdary schools were asked increasingly to cater for all types of adolescents, not just the more select ones of a previous generation’ (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003, p.12).

The post-war middle-class citizenry was better-educated, more affluent and self-confident and included migrants with high ambitions for their sons and daughters. A changing social climate was marked by the closure of most of the pre-vocational secondary schools and the allocation of students to high schools in their local districts, the majority of which were still single-sex.

This gradual transformation of New South Wales schools reflected growing student populations, changing educational philosophies and a conscious effort to retain the ‘standard thousand’ enrolment, rather than moving to the much larger campuses

favoured by the Americans, Canadians and, to a lesser extent, the British public system. Such an historical transformation can be tracked through the story of a former leader of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, who says that,

The school I went to in Liverpool - which I went to from 1943 to 1949 on the one site - had a boys' primary, an infants, a girls' primary, a junior high, a junior domestic home science high school and a junior technical high school all on the one site, and only the Infants was co-ed. Now, two schools, the secondary schools, were taken off and plonked over at Warwick Farm in two very new buildings adjacent to one another: Liverpool Boys and Liverpool Girls. So they still are...they've stayed as separate schools. And it's because of the time that they were built, more than anything else. If they'd done it today, they would have done it differently. They would have made two high schools in different parts of Liverpool and both co-ed. But in those days that's what they did. That's the late fifties. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003)

This chapter and this study focus on differentiation as a longstanding feature of public education in New South Wales, specifically as this could be seen in the establishment of separate facilities for boys and girls. As has been seen, differentiation in the provision was evident in the types of public schools available to rural and metropolitan residents as well as the gender-based variations in curriculum offerings. The significant population growth of the post-World War II era provided the impetus for some reconsideration of the highly selective approach to education.

The *Report of the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales*, commissioned by the Minister for Education in September, 1953 and submitted in October, 1957 offers the most comprehensive review of education from that period. The Wyndham Report, as it is also known, includes a unique summary of the evolution of public schooling, particularly in terms of the traditional practice of differentiation based on gender and class. The document receives frequent mention throughout this study and, as will be seen in the following chapter, is regarded as the catalyst for a critical era involving the New South Wales single-sex public schools. According to a NSW Education Commission (1985, p.5) report,

The *Wyndham Scheme* for secondary education, introduced in the 1960's, dramatically changed the secondary school from a *selective* purpose to a *comprehensive* one. It provided for all

students a schooling which had certain common elements, in line with the communal needs of all students. It allowed students to delay decisions about career choices until a greater level of maturity had been reached. Further, it made comprehensive neighbourhood schooling available to all, wherever possible.

The Wyndham Report dealt at length with the diversity of school types in metropolitan and country areas, noting this in the context of increasing numbers of comprehensive public high schools in 'fast-developing outer areas of Sydney' (Wyndham, 1957, p.37).

First, with the exception of the historic high schools in Maitland [regional New South Wales], they are all co-educational in the sense of enrolling both boys and girls. Second, they provide as much of the full range of secondary courses of all types as is justified by local demand or made possible by availability of staff ... Third, all the pupils of the district who have completed the primary school course, together with those whose needs are best met by the General Activities course, are enrolled in the same school. Entry to such secondary schools thus carries with it no sense of social stratification; as communities of adolescents they embrace the full range of ability and interests. (p.38)

Given that Wyndham's committee took four years to produce its report, it can be seen that the introduction of a new comprehensive, coeducational school model was underway well before the results of the report were published. The acceptance of the model in metropolitan areas was partly a consequence of demographic shifts, particularly as country people moved to the cities for further education and employment. The coeducational nature of school campuses in regional New South Wales reflected necessary economies of scale not applicable to their well-populated metropolitan counterparts. However, historical informants in this study offer the perspective that differentiation between rural and metropolitan schools was due not only to smaller populations and fewer resources, but also to an attitude in rural New South Wales that was more conducive to continued coeducation (or at least, not anti-coeducation) because that had been the tradition. One bureaucrat who served during the period recalls that,

People who were born and bred in the country, and who were educated in the country were, as far as I can see, quite happy with the co-ed schools. And in my experience of them – I saw

a lot of them as an Inspector, moving around in my own region and from time to time visiting other regions and regional schools – I was always impressed with the co-ed schools generally. The community liked them, because they grew out of the community and with the help of the community. (Interview, Buchan, 2004)

The New South Wales Teachers' Federation, which represented all public school teachers in the state, unequivocally supported the neighbourhood comprehensive school model. According to a former leader of the Federation, this body had a strong, ideological commitment to comprehensive education and rejected the provision of schools that were selective in any way (George J., personal communication, 2 October 2003). A further explanation comes from a former Deputy-President and member of the NSW Education Commission, who claims that,

The policy from people like Wyndham who was himself a product of a country high school, and most of his senior officers and his regional directors – very large numbers of them were from country high schools – as they unfolded through the fifties, was that they started to see the country high school model as a very good model. And it saved money. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003)

There is also official evidence of the privileging of single-sex institutions in city areas. In 1956 the segregation of school students by gender was presented as education policy in a speech given by the then Minister for Education, who announced that,

An important part of my Department's plans for the future is the provision of schools built especially for girls [reflecting gender-based curriculum]. Your school here is one example. At East Hills another girls' high school has recently been opened. Other secondary schools for girls are being erected at Birrong and Moorefield which [mirror the educational program that] Narrabeen Girls' High School provides for girls who live near the Northern beaches. A large, modern high school [for girls] is also nearing completion at Wiley Park. (Heffron, 1956)

The intentional differentiation of the curriculum was reinforced in the Minister's detailed descriptions of the modern equipment being installed for boys' manual arts courses and girls' home science studies. At the girls' school he explained that, '[t]he

girls who study home science here will know the importance of a balanced diet for physical well-being; in the same way a balanced diet of learning makes for a healthier mental outlook' (Heffron, 1956, p.4). Such concentration on domestic science instruction throughout most of the twentieth century goes some way to explaining the lesser status of girls' schools and the students' limited post-school options, as explained by the former principal of three girls' schools.

I think it was 1955. I taught there earlier on, and then returned as Principal. The timetabling was very much based on domestic science things ... that is, there was home science – cooking – for one full morning and needlework for one full afternoon, so that there was one whole day each week without academic subjects. And so many of the schools were domestic science schools, and they were definitely on a lower rung. (Interview, Harris, 2004)

One former teacher and regional director describes a climate of purposeful gender-based differentiation.

They had separate principals and they had their own program and they virtually worked as independent schools ... Sometimes there was a road between them, like the East Hills schools. Sometimes you were blocks away, like the Bankstown schools. But a lot of it was based on those residual ideas about the needs of girls and the needs of boys in terms of separate education, separate qualifications, separate goals. (Interview, Guthrie, 2004)

Other evidence exists, however, that the expansion of state schooling during the middle years of the twentieth century inspired some organizational and curricular experimentation in an effort to achieve fiscal efficiency. For example, the establishment of East Hills Girls High School in 1953 may be seen as a pre-Wyndham response to population growth and social change. A newspaper article written some years later describes the opening of the first permanent buildings to cater for 1039 girls, pointing out that,

East Hills Girls' High School has also the distinction of being in the vanguard of another important educational experiment. This is the Twin-School plan which is an experimental plan to gain all the advantages of the co-educational school without its disadvantages. Under this plan there are two high schools, a separate school for girls and a separate school for boys built sufficiently close for the two schools to co-operate in such

activities as debating, drama and social functions. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 August 1959)

While the article provides no indication of a change in government policy regarding the longstanding practice of gender segregation, it is conceivable that the development of the ‘twin schools’ model, coincident with the rise of the comprehensive, coeducational high school in newer parts of Sydney, represented the early stages of a policy shift. This is reflected in the wording of Harold Wyndham’s report (1957), which, it must be emphasised, was released well after the new model was introduced, but two years before the abovementioned newspaper piece. The report states that,

While, by tradition, the high schools at present under review have been separate schools for boys and for girls, some of the new schools in the outer suburban areas are, in effect, “twin” schools. In these, separate buildings for boys and for girls are placed on the one site so that facilities such as assembly halls may be shared in common and the pupils may combine for certain activities. (p.37)

It is a matter for conjecture as to whether ‘certain activities’ could have included combining male and female students for academic purposes. The failure to mention it indicates that this was not specifically encouraged, much less mandated. It is interesting to note that none of this study’s historical informants could explain the exact purpose of the ‘twin schools’ model, the consensus being that their establishment in major urban areas evolved out of years of gender segregation in schools and in response to the need to rationalise building costs. A former principal of several girls’ schools recounts that,

We had seven or eight hundred. See, it was very much the twin school with the combined hall – the girls’ [comprehensive] school was there and the boys’ [comprehensive] school was there and we had the hall in the middle. (Interview, Harris, 2004)

While the aforementioned *Sydney Morning Herald* article refers to a relatively limited relationship between the two East Hills campuses, this study’s historical informants recalled that each school developed its own approach to the opportunities presented by this model. One former teacher and Deputy Director-General testifies that,

There was some thinking that there might some kind of interchange system to, for example, teach mathematics to the girls at a higher level...if the girls wanted to do Honours in mathematics, and so on. There was something happening at East Hills Boys along those lines, but as far as I remember, it wasn't very successful. (Interview, Buchan, 2004)

The 'twin schools' model may be interpreted as one strategy devised to manage a period of transition during which the high schools were in competition with a range of other secondary schools, including the coeducational variants. In at least one case the academic 'interchange' referred to earlier was not an intentional outcome of the twin schools model, but rather a strategy introduced to address falling enrolments. As one former principal notes,

... [comprehensive coeducational] was seen as a much better school and it was co-ed so gradually students would go across to that school. We could see that our numbers were going down and consequently we couldn't offer the choice of subjects, so we brought in a combined timetable for the seniors so that they could get their subjects.

So you brought the girls and boys together to ... ?

To give them the choice. We had French and Art and Home Science for the boys and they had Tech Drawing for the girls and there was mathematics, I think it was called 4 Unit then ... we combined that so they could get a class. It was an interesting experiment.

That must have been ahead of many others?

Oh, we were ahead of our time, to such an extent you wouldn't believe it. (Interview, Harris, 2004)

It is important, too, to set any consideration of the 'twin schools' model within the broader context of the selective nature of education in 1950s New South Wales, wherein children were allocated to post-primary education in a diverse range of institutions on the basis of examinations and recommendations. In the estimation of the Wyndham Report, this 'ad hoc development ... [was] proving to be limited in its scope' (p.32) and the introduction of additional school variants did not serve to 'dispel the doubts we feel as to the wisdom of segregating adolescents in different types of secondary school in so final a fashion at the age of twelve years' (p.37).

The 'twin schools' model arguably provides some explanation for the enduring appeal of the single-sex provision. In earlier sections it has been mentioned that the debate over whether to mix or segregate the sexes at school has yet to produce incontrovertible research findings in support of one or the other structure. Similarly, apart from providing a critical historical overview of the state's differentiated educational provision, the Wyndham Report demands close scrutiny for its arguments in favour of the introduction of coeducation across the whole New South Wales system. Among the recommendations relating to the reorganisation of secondary schooling, the report states that,

Despite the inconclusive nature of the evidence placed before us and the lack of unanimity on the part of the Committee, we record that professional and lay opinion as expressed to us is that as new secondary schools are established by the Department of Education, they should, generally speaking, be co-educational schools, although we are aware that conditions in a particular locality may call for some modification of this general rule, e.g. 'twin schools' might be established. (Wyndham, 1957, p.105)

According to one historical informant, it is appropriate to conclude that the document 'had this co-ed thing kind of tagged on to the end of it' (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003).

This section of the study has emphasised the attempts by the state authorities to address the educational needs of a growing population and the parallel commissioning of an official reassessment of New South Wales public school system. The previous extract provides some explanation of the continued existence of those single-sex schools that were established as twins, despite the increasing popularity of comprehensive, coeducational facilities. In later chapters it will be seen that the same 'lack of unanimity' exhibited by Wyndham's committee may be an ongoing reason for the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools. That is, although the 1957 report recommended the statewide adoption of the comprehensive model for public education, it enshrined differentiation as a politically and pedagogically defensible response to 'conditions in a particular locality'. Further, this study contends that by publicly acknowledging the 'inconclusive nature of the evidence' and failing to mandate the introduction of coeducation as a prerequisite for

change, the report established the context for a critical era in New South Wales single-sex schooling.

3.8 1960s: The transition to coeducation

A history compiled by the NSW Department of Education and Training (2003, p.12) says of the Wyndham Scheme that it ‘confirmed the trend towards comprehensive, coeducational high schools which had been occurring in New South Wales’. The use of the word ‘trend’ supports this study’s contention that the introduction of coeducation had its origins in ideology and socio-political pragmatism rather than research-based policy. It is also a reflection of the long lead time required for planning and constructing new schools.

For example, in 1962 an article in an official publication of the New South Wales Department of Education advised that no one should begin a teaching career without a close reading of the Wyndham Report. According to the author, then Headmaster of the coeducational Maitland High School,

It is a synthesis of all that the most progressive and creative minds have been able to suggest as a means of satisfying the claimant needs of this developing democracy. It indicates revolutionary changes in educational thinking...It arose from doubt and discontent [and] from the universal feeling that the shackles of a system that had lagged behind post-war demands and needs must be thrown off to permit social progress, academic freedom, and, in the end, the ideal circumstances for each individual soul to realise itself. (*The Education Gazette*, 1 January 1962, p.6).

The extract is a sign of the breadth and depth of changes in the general climate of education that came to Australia in the 1960s from the United States and the United Kingdom in particular, and to a lesser extent from other European sources (Faure, 1972). The influence of overseas trends is also found in an article published to all New South Wales educators during the same period. Originally produced by the Comprehensive Schools Committee in England, a body formed to promote informed public discussion of comprehensive schooling, the document includes the statement that,

We need to recognise that in applying the comprehensive principle to the school system we are doing no more than breaking with the past so that we can make a fresh start...at least there will be a minimum fulfillment of the principle of equality of educational opportunity and a corporate social unity which may then spill over into adult life. (*The Education Gazette*, 1 March 1966, p.42)

A combination of idealism and experimentation is evident in this piece, with its roots in a post-war rejection of class-based differentiation. A number of researchers emphasise shifts in educational policy since the 1960s by political parties wanting to demonstrate a commitment to social democracy (Barcan, 1995; Marginson, 1993; Wilson, 1991; Angus, 1991; Deem, 1981). Phillips (2003, p.5) posits that while various arguments were put forward in the United Kingdom to end policies of differentiation in schooling, 'the decision ... to abolish selection and adopt universal comprehensive education was ideological and political in nature.' British researcher Deem (1981, p.137) refers to 'a gradual shift towards comprehensive secondary schooling partly prompted by a (false) belief that such schooling would help eradicate the worst inequalities (class, not gender)'.

In the United Kingdom, says Deem (1981, p.137), the shift to comprehensive education – and by default to coeducation – 'was also brought about by an apparent consensus about education in the country as a whole.' According to Wilson (1991, p.51) '[c]o-education in the public sector was, in general, a by-product of the comprehensivisation programme of the 1960s. It was assumed that all pupils would benefit from better facilities and would also experience a more "normal" school environment in mixed schools.' In Australia, it would appear that the Wyndham recommendations resonated with the major political parties as well as with other stakeholders. If the low volume of references in the literature can be taken as a guide, the high rate of single-sex school closures and amalgamations took place without attracting the attention of local researchers (Mueller, 1987).

As mentioned previously, the most prominent research of the period came from Dale (1969) who used a series of questionnaires to evaluate student relationships and subject choices in single-sex and coeducational institutions, among other issues. In contrast to the British experience, described by Deem (1981) as relatively

uncontentious, he gives a clear description of the emotive nature of the debate in the United States, writing that,

Protagonists of co-education have met in head-on collision with supporters of the established order and, since both sides have been short of research evidence, their arguments have tended to continue over the years without any hope of resolution, bursting out with redoubled vehemence whenever a relevant local problem has arisen on which the contest could centre (Dale, 1969, p.xiii).

The conclusion was that 'the world has two sexes and an education which keeps these sexes apart is not preparing children for life in the world' (Dale, 1969, p.39).

Fitzgerald (1972) claims that the 1960s saw a major increase in the level of interest in educational matters demonstrated by Australian federal and state governments. He cites the establishment of a Commonwealth legislative research service in 1966 and the election of better-educated politicians as reasons for 'far more informed discussion based on published literature and, in particular, the reports of official committees of inquiry' (p.13). He also emphasises that the official educational focus tended to be on improving existing services, although 'issues involving major structural change have aroused increasing interest' (p.14).

New South Wales was not alone, nor indeed the first, in advocating the coeducational structure. The difference lies mainly in the manner and timing with which the new school type was introduced. In general, the policy statements of other jurisdictions were stronger in tone than the Wyndham recommendations. In Victoria the girls' school lobby was influential in retaining seven single-sex metropolitan high schools, with only one boys' school remaining to the present day. A departmental policy document of 1960 stated that,

We accept the desirability of a single type of secondary school providing a full range of courses and facilities, at least in the metropolitan areas and larger country centres ... The two separate school types and the existence of sex-segregated secondary schools we regard as reflections of past social conditions without relevance to present needs. (cited in Turney, 1975, p.105)

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defers to individual institutions but clearly nominates the preferred school type.

In this area, as in the internal organisation of schools in general, we regard decisions as being appropriately made by staff in consultation with students; we wish only to declare our support for certain lines of action without seeking to impose them ...

8.46 Accordingly, we recommend that ...

(c) All secondary schools should be co-educational. (Turney, 1975, p.353)

A further, and equally important, development in the New South Wales context was the requirement to address what Campbell (2003, p.581) describes as an 'impending enrolment crisis.' According to a biographer of Harold Wyndham (Hughes, 2001), the demographic predictions of a 'baby boom' made it clear that the existing public school system would not cope. In this sense, the establishment of comprehensive, coeducational institutions to provide education to the masses was also driven by economic considerations.

The 1960s were characterised by enormous growth in new coeducational facilities in New South Wales. While no new single-sex schools were built after 1961, throughout the decade there were changes to the existing girls' and boys' junior high schools to upgrade them to full (but still gender-segregated) high schools. In his comparison of the New South Wales experience with that of the New Zealand public system, Lee (2003, p.48) emphasises the difficulty of replacing differentiation with a comprehensive system while simultaneously attempting to 'satisfy every educational demand.' The survival of some single-sex and selective schools in New South Wales may thus reflect the enormous size and cost of effecting change on this scale. As a former NSW Minister for Education asserted,

The Wyndham Scheme itself was just, in a sense, so enormous for such a big system ... it was doomed to part failure, I think, as well as part success, simply because of the size of everything. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

In this regard, it is also useful to note the time lag between policy changes affecting the public system generally and the impact of these changes on the single-sex option in particular. As one former Minister for Education summarises,

One of the reasons for that, I think, is that the education system in New South Wales was just so huge. I often used to liken it to a battleship; if you want to change direction you've got to start turning the wheel a long time beforehand and wait for a while before it turns around. It was also one of the reasons I personally always felt that you wanted to hasten slowly, because a decision you make today isn't going to be fully implemented until – depending on what the issue would be – several years down the track. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

According to a former education bureaucrat, the conversion and closure of many single-sex schools was 'a move not inspired by educational considerations so much as administrative and budgetary neatness' (Interview, Guthrie, 2004).

Tied grants were provided by federal and state governments to this end, but it was also at a time when qualified teachers were in short supply. Many schools were amalgamated in all systems so that the costs were contained...many single-sex schools were combined...The existing selective single-sex schools with high retention rates were already fairly well set up for the exigencies of the new system and continued as separate entities. Where the available land was insufficient for to accommodate extra buildings for laboratories, technical rooms and more modern libraries, some of these schools were amalgamated either on adjoining sites, as in Newcastle, or the larger existing site of one, as in the case of the Fort Streets, or rebuilt as a new campus taking in a number of schools, which explains why the old Redfern [Junior Technical School 1913-1928, Home Science School 1913-1962], Leichhardt [Junior Girls High School 1962-1973] and Arncliffe [1965-1975], for instance, closed and pupils transferred to new schools. (Interview, Guthrie, 2004)

Other historical informants also point to economics as the main obstacle to the full implementation of the 'neighbourhood comprehensive school' model. For example, a former NSW Director-General of Education explains the process for implementing system-wide change.

Well, you had a residual number of schools. You had a government asking annually for reports on progress towards a series of objectives.

One objective being ultimately a completely co-educational system?

Oh, yes. You couldn't ignore it, but then on the other hand, you had to look at cases such as X and Y, and in the 1970s an increasing retention rate, and building requirements with limited money – where do we go? What facilities do we build? Our new schools program was on top of us and any changes, whether it be that [single-sex to co-educational schooling] or whatever, you had to assess in terms of community attitudes but equally importantly, what were the financial demands? What could we do if we were proposing to bring these two schools together?

And often that was the reality check. Many of them were just too expensive to undertake at that time. Boys' and girls' schools have different basic needs but in addition to that they have different courses. They were at the expensive end of provision. The facilities for girls were expensive and the facilities for the boys – the whole of the technology area was expensive.

So, to that extent, we had to be realistic about whether we could take those on at the same time as meet the demands for Campbelltown, for example, and all the new development.

Often they just had to go on the backburner. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

Just prior to the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme, the then Minister for Education stated that, '[a] uniform type of secondary education is not desired in this State and teachers are encouraged to try new methods and forms of school organization' (NSW Parliament Hansard, 1961, p.546). While the Wyndham recommendations centered on a more egalitarian curriculum for the first four years of secondary education, this pronouncement appears to advocate increased autonomy for schools. This may help to explain the survival of some single-sex schools. On the other hand, Hughes' (2001) analysis of the Wyndham Report insists that differentiation, at least up to the senior years, was regarded as highly undesirable. Citing extracts from letters and speeches written by the former Director-General himself, he asserts that the philosophical basis for change was clear.

The selective high schools were concentrated in metropolitan areas and 'thus not representative of the whole public secondary school system'. Selection on the basis of sex should also be avoided, since wastage of talent was even higher for girls and sex differences in special abilities and interests, had, 'in the past, often been exaggerated. (Hughes, 2001, p.14)

It should not be assumed, however, that an increasingly egalitarian curriculum meant equal opportunities for girls and boys. Retention rates to Year 12 among boys were significantly higher than those of girls up to the mid-1970s. Girls' employment options were largely restricted to traditional roles and subject choices reflected this. As Connell (1993) explains, the comprehensive variant in Australia retained selectivity in the form of a variety of sorting methods. The Wyndham Scheme stressed the comprehensive nature of the curriculum for both sexes up to Year 10, and supported the separation of students into various educational and occupational destinations after the compulsory years of schooling were completed. Most systems, including that of New South Wales, employed selection strategies such as intelligence tests, streamed classes and public examinations to ensure that students proceeded along the lines to which they were believed to be best suited. As in the United Kingdom, this reflected national economic goals that depended upon a steady supply of skilled employees. In the early 1960s, Australian state and federal governments began to link improvements in education with increased productivity in the workplace (Connell, 1993).

In a reference to the single-sex and selective schools that survived the reorganization of the public system, Campbell (2003, p.581) concludes that 'neither the form of comprehensive schooling advocated nor the nature of its implementation was pure or unproblematic.' The provision of comprehensive education in the first four years of secondary school was to be followed by streaming in the senior years in order to enable academic students to matriculate into university. In effect, this continued to privilege students from the academically selective, single-sex schools. According to Connell (1993, p.41), the Wyndham Committee's reforms essentially brought the rural secondary model to the cities, but, importantly, '[s]ome of the more favoured, single-sex, selective high schools were retained in metropolitan areas.' The high-profile status of these institutions is described by a former NSW Director of Planning and advisor to Harold Wyndham, who writes that, '[t]he retention of a few selectives was a concession to powerful ex-pupil associations' (Webster, 1993, cited in Hughes, 2001, p.9).

Nevertheless the recommendations of the Wyndham Report (1957) reflected an increasingly meritocratic ideology in education. With specific regard to the single-sex

schools, the contention is that although the Report did not make a specific case against them, it reinforced a view already in circulation that educating boys and girls together not only did not disadvantage either sex, but represented a change that was entirely consistent with the delivery of a more equitable schooling system. The portrayal of the comprehensive, coeducational model as a modern norm, albeit unaccompanied by any official denunciation of the longstanding single-sex alternative, thus had the effect of reducing residual sympathy for the older model and of subtly redefining gender segregation as an impediment to progressive education. However, the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools is also evidence of the failure to convince New South Wales citizens of the need to remove longstanding choices in the education system. This study therefore suggests that a more vigorous implementation process might have resulted in the elimination of the single-sex variants but other factors, outlined above, worked to reduce the impact of the Report.

4 A critical era in New South Wales single-sex public education

Citizens of the twentieth century had always been conscious of living in a time of rapid and radical change and none were more sensitive to the need to cope with a changing world than those who lived in the 1970s. (Connell, 1980, p.333)

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter the *Report of the Committee Appointed to Survey Secondary Education in New South Wales* (also known as the Wyndham Report) was discussed in terms of its significance as a reflection of the ideological shift of the 1960s and as the mechanism for change to the New South Wales public school system. Earlier sections also suggested that the enduring appeal of a large number of single-sex public high schools can be traced back to the Report's recommendations regarding the retention of some single-sex variants (i.e. 'twin schools') within a new system of comprehensive, coeducational schools.

This chapter draws on Hughes' (2001, p.3) contention that the Report 'supplies an essential starting point for the contextualizing of much recent policy-making in school education in Australia.' Although the socio-political context had shifted to portray a progressive school structure as non-selective in terms of ability and gender, the Report's failure to make the case against single-sex education per se resulted in an uncertain policy climate in New South Wales, where such schools had always been most numerous.

In this chapter, the two decades following the implementation of the Wyndham Scheme – the 1970s and 1980s – are identified as a critical era in the history of the New South Wales single-sex public education. During these years, after more than a century of privileging gender-segregated public institutions, a reorganised public education system undertook to halve the number of schools that admitted boys or girls only. That many of these have endured despite this policy shift constitutes an historical phenomenon in Australian education and is evidence of an inability or unwillingness on the part of policymakers to address, and resolve, the debate over whether it is better to educate male and female students together or apart. A

consequence of this has been the failure to convince New South Wales consumers that the single-sex school model is intrinsically less capable than its coeducational counterparts of delivering an effective educational program.

In approving the continuation of some single-sex schools the Wyndham Report implicitly acknowledged the difficulty of removing this longstanding option from the public system. In effect, therefore, the Report established the precedent for subsequent bureaucratic and political concessions to consumer choice as an overriding organizational principle. As already mentioned, other state education systems have also retained some of these schools, perhaps in an indirect acknowledgment of their traditional status. Crittenden's (1981) analysis of the policy shifts in Australian education after 1960 reveals that,

‘Comprehensiveness’ has meant that the same school is provided for all the adolescents (boys and girls) living in the same area. The curriculum has often not been comprehensive in the usual sense. In the early stages particularly, what it involved was the provision of separate programs for different sub-groups of students attending school at the same place. The comprehensive theory has also been qualified by the continued existence of some selected high schools and some single sex (and, in Victoria, by the division of secondary education into technical and high schools). (p.26)

The adoption of the comprehensive, coeducational model, viewed from the perspective of the impact on the single-sex schools, represented an ideological shift that is also reflected in the latter group's absence from the educational discourse of the period. This is most pronounced because of the controversial nature of some school closures; notably, the most frequent references to the impact of policy change on individual schools are found in media reports rather than in the research literature (Mueller, 1987).

4.2 Identifying a critical era in single-sex education

For the purposes of this study, a critical era is defined as one in which a policy shift leads to profound, unprecedented changes to traditional practices. Some researchers suggest that it is possible to identify critical eras in which new ideologies challenge longstanding practices and beliefs (Dudley & Vidovich, 1995; Seddon, 1989; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Iannacone, 1984, 1987). During such periods certain socio-political and economic assumptions are reconsidered and pre-existing ideologies are replaced. According to this perspective, policy changes are the result of ‘a major ideological shift, a relatively short and sharp critical or re-alignment era and a longer period of quiescence once the new ideology is established’ (Dudley & Vidovich, 1995, p.181). Such shifts tend to occur across countries that already have some views and values in common.

The critical era is defined here as the 1970s and 1980s, the decades immediately following the publication of the Wyndham Report. As mentioned earlier, this period was marked by a significant reduction in the number of single-sex schools available to New South Wales students, evidently as a direct response to the restructuring of public education proposed in the Report.

An analysis of government records shows that the provision of single-sex, secondary public schools peaked in the mid-1960s and experienced the greatest decline from the early 1970s. It is important, however, to distinguish between changes made to the junior, technical, home science and other semi-vocational variants that had never previously held full secondary school status, and the establishment of designated single-sex boys’ and girls’ high schools. Although the former are included in the total number of schools affected by the critical era identified in this chapter, this study places a special emphasis on the standard single-sex high schools that offered an educational pathway through to matriculation.¹ As no single-sex school has been affected since 1992, a period of quiescence may be considered to have existed since then.

¹ A list of single-sex schools established since 1867, including the dates on which schools were closed, is provided in Appendix E.

Figure 4.1 represents all single-sex schools that were identified by name as secondary institutions and have operated under the jurisdiction of the New South Wales system of public education.



See print copy for figure 4.1

In philosophically aligned nations, opposing political parties eventually resolve many ideological tensions, a process of compromise that Seddon (1989) calls ‘settlement’. This allows the policy process to move forward in a climate of relative consensus. If no political party speaks forcefully for the retention of current policy, or at least against major change, unofficial consensus can be considered to have been reached. Drawing on Hughes (2001), this study suggests that an example of a systemic settlement was the comprehensive school model as envisaged by Harold Wyndham.

4.2.1 Policy-making during a critical era

There is evidence that the adoption of comprehensive coeducational schooling in New South Wales attracted such broad ideological support that this accounts at least in part for the absence of the single-sex public school provision from mainstream education discourse.

The statements of one historical informant support the suggestion that the implementation of coeducation resulted from a degree of philosophical consensus (or settlement). A former Director-General of Education suggests that the proposed model resonated strongly with many stakeholders.

So, in broad terms, was government policy supporting co-education based on any educational research from overseas or on anything in particular, or was it just a trend that had finally reached New South Wales?

You have to go back to Wyndham, the Wyndham report. The whole of that basis, the whole of the underlying philosophy was for co-education as well as comprehensive schools. No doubt about that. If you knew Wyndham, you knew that was a strongly held belief in his mind, as it would have been in mine, at the time.

And accepted by all sides of politics as the logical way forward?

Yes, exactly. That's the significant point. But the divergent views were not so apparent at the time. I mean, you come into the 1970s and you are getting a better educated community and a more articulate community. You have a media that is very alive and looking for issues and the scene changes dramatically. I think that Wyndham had no difficulty in his time because his advocacy was so strong and his logic was so clear that the report was recognised in the increasing population and the retention rates. Something had to be done, the old system needed rethinking, but behind all that, you've got to look at what the philosophy was. If you wanted to educate children for this world, then in fact you had to provide a normal environment in which to educate them, and a normal environment did not take into account separation. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

Given the Australian reliance on overseas trends and educational research, the comprehensive, coeducational model may be seen as an inevitable legacy of American and British influences. Gill's (2004, p.84) summary is that,

A pattern of increasing adoption of co-education in the non-government sector has evolved over the past two decades which have also seen the demise of government supported single-sex schools (once the preserve of the technical high schools) in the general move towards comprehensivisation – a trend in which once again Australian education followed the British system.

Harman (1994, p.7) claims that 'any government's policy on education generally reflects its view of society and its political creed.' He also debunks the notion that policy-making is a careful, well-planned process and proposes a far broader perspective, saying '[s]ometimes a policy is the outcome of compromise, sometimes it springs from new opportunities rather than a problem, sometimes it just seems to happen, without any formal decisions being taken' (p.34). Such a view is echoed in the recollections of another historical informant, a former Minister for Education.

The question of single-sex schools used to pop up from time to time but it didn't enjoy a high priority. Just the same as there was no *really* high priority on the selective schools issue. The former government [Liberal] had started – although it was part of the Labor Party platform – the former government had actually started de-selectivising some selective schools. One of them was my own old school, Fort Street Boys'. So the movement was on, but we just kind of let it happen. If there was some parental or community wish for either de-selecting – if that's the right word – or co-edding single-sex schools, then we'd look towards it. But we were not the engine; we were not pushing it. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

Another explanation is offered by Taylor (2001), who is convinced of the important role played by social movements in policy-making, although she maintains that their influence will inevitably wax and wane. She argues that '[w]ithin this view, policies are negotiated settlements which have to be constantly redefined as contexts change, new forms of domination emerge, and new social networks form and coalesce to form new social movements' (p.47). It can be difficult, therefore, to determine the basis on which decisions are made. Whitty and Edwards (1994, p.14) assert that '[a]s judged by its real effects, policy is often made in the process of implementation.' In the local

context, this conclusion is echoed by an informant, who says of the 1970s and 1980s that, '[d]ecisions had little to do with research. Policy-making in education has often been accidental and irrational, not well thought through or necessarily logical' (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004).

While consumers of education probably have an instinctive desire to believe that all decisions are based on rational, research-based foundations, a range of informants in this study provide evidence that policy-making tends instead to be short term, reflecting political expediency and pragmatism. This view rests on an acceptance of close links between education and politics, which must be considered inevitable, given that a state system of public education operates under the jurisdiction of the government of the day.

4.2.2 A critical era for New South Wales single-sex school communities

As discussed in earlier chapters, this study asserts that the Wyndham Report's equivocal statements regarding single-sex public school alternatives resulted in a lack of policy clarity. That is, while the Report recommended that some schools remain open in recognition of particular local circumstances, the document inevitably made education policy vulnerable to reinterpretation by successive governments and their bureaucracies.

The absence of an evidence-based case *against* single-sex education and *for* its comprehensive, coeducational replacement also made it difficult to persuade some school communities to accept significant changes to a longstanding provision. For example, historical records relating to the closure of Newcastle Boys High School [1930-1976] and Newcastle Girls High School [1929-1975] reveal that the communities were not convinced.

The decision by the NSW Minister for Education, Mr. E. A. Willis, to close these schools, and have a uniform, comprehensive and coeducational high school system for Newcastle has therefore caused a great deal of upset and resentment in that community. His decision, justified with all the ponderous verbiage of progressive educational ideology, raises in an acute way the problems parents face when confronted with the enormous weight of a large government

department, whose decisions affect their families profoundly and intimately. (Australian Council for Educational Standards, 1973, p.10)

A now defunct Sydney-based lobby group, the Australian Council for Educational Standards (1973, p.12), referring to the imminent closure of Fort Street Girls' High School, advised that concerned citizens 'should also ask if the Newcastle decisions are a forerunner to a State-wide policy.' A group of parents called for 'the support of all persons in NSW who are concerned at declining standards of scholarship which are being introduced without adequate debate, by those blindly following current fashions in education overseas' (ACES, 1973, p.10).

However, historical records indicate that some schools took advantage of the ideological shift to initiate change themselves. For example, a series of local newspaper articles in 1980, which documented the experience of Manly Girls High School and Manly Boys High School, claims that the state governments' decision 'ended a six year struggle by teachers and parents at the schools to have them made coeducational' (*The Manly Daily*, Friday May 2, 1980, p.3). In the opinion of the then principal of the boys' school, '[c]o-education is a lot more typical of the society we live in. Only unusual sectors of society live in all male or all female situations' (p.3).

A Sydney newspaper editorial from the period expresses cynicism about the policy-making process, arguing that,

We know enough despite the confusion [over single-sex versus co-educational schooling] not to make categorical assumptions. Mr Cavalier and his department are wrong, therefore, to rule out single-sex schools, either in the selective or the comprehensive modes, as an option worth preserving. It is not good enough to argue, as the Minister does, that comprehensive co-educational schooling has been a bi-partisan policy in the past. The policy might have been relevant for the 1950s and 1960s; whether it is still relevant needs proof rather than assertion. This policy may turn out to be based on nothing more substantial than the bureaucratic urge to reduce the complexity of the education system so that it is easier to run. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1986, p.2)

According to Australian educational historian Barcan (1988, p.274), '[t]he [NSW] Department of Education took the opportunity wherever possible to close single-sex high schools, despite parental protests.' Some of these decisions attracted

considerable controversy (for example, Fort Street Girls High School, Cremorne Girls High School, Newcastle Girls and Boys High Schools, Balgowlah Boys High School).

Official government records do not refer to a case being made against gender segregation in and of itself as an obstacle to any school's capacity to deliver a comprehensive educational program. This may explain why an earlier study of single-sex school closures in New South Wales found that the official explanation was that it was for 'educational reasons' (Mueller, 1984, p.65). A former Minister for Education, whose tenure oversaw the closure and restructuring of many single-sex schools, says the reasons for the changes were made clear.

So if we can just home in on the single-sex schools issue by the time you were in the chair, how big an issue was that?

It wasn't a big issue at all. It just wasn't a big issue at all. I was the one who amalgamated or not - that isn't the right word. I was the one who made Maitland Boys and Maitland Girls co-educational and changed their name, but the great work was done by Eric Willis [Minister for Education 1972–1976]. There weren't a lot of single-sex schools remaining and in a city like Sydney where there was such a wide number of schools it didn't matter that there might be a Riverside Girls or a Cheltenham Girls, or a Drummoyne Boys – which folded during my time I think – because there were plenty of comprehensive, co-educational schools in the vicinity so there was a wide range of choices. In Maitland, however, I acted because it was one town, two schools, a new school was coming into the town, a school called Rutherford, and the advice was and I accepted it, that it was an anomaly to have a single town with two single-sex schools. So I changed them.

And where did that advice come from?

That came from within the Department.

And would they have acted in response in parental request, do you think?

Possibly, but if it was the parents they were very bloody silent. Once it was on the board supporters were thin on the ground. You usually found that people... there wasn't that much of a debate whenever something happened. The overwhelming chorus wasn't against you or for you; you found people debated amongst themselves.

Was the Maitland decision on economic grounds as much as anything?

No, no, strictly education. There were no economic grounds at all. It was good for the Maitland community, boys and girls. Brothers and sisters could go to the same school. (Interview, Cavalier, 2003)

A lack of clarity regarding the single-sex schools' place in the public system was a feature of the period. For example, a former regional director remembers the 'co-edding' of schools in the 1970s and 1980s as an 'edict' which all such officeholders were expected to implement (Interview, Guthrie, 2004). On the other hand, a former teacher and politician who was involved in the establishment of the Labor Women's Conference in 1981, maintains that although the policy commitment to coeducation was unequivocal, the single-sex schools themselves were never a prominent feature of educational discourse.

I remember a fair amount of discussion, but it was much more away from the narrow educational milieu. I remember a lot of discussion – and quite heated discussion – about whether girls did better in single-sex schools and I guess probably early consensus about whether the other effects of segregating girls and boys – the social effects – and the longer term effects, and what it said about society's attitudes to girls and women, outweighed the fact that girls did appear to do better in single-sex schools. But certainly, there was a very, very firm sort of one line policy statement that was adopted quite early and stuck to very firmly by the education policy committee, which was basically that the Labor Party was in favour of comprehensive, co-educational high schools and that one line sort of sat there and sat there....I don't think there was anywhere near the passion to get rid of the old single-sex schools. So [there was] a bit of a feeling that, if they're there, well, we'll leave them. (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004)

Other historical informants insist that the shift to universal coeducation was carried out in a climate of community consultation and consideration of local issues (Interviews, Cavenagh, 2004; Swan, 2004; Winder, 2004; Cavalier, 2003). However, as the former principal of a highly successful girls' comprehensive school recalls, not all stakeholders were as well informed about the implementation of the new policy as they might have been.

And to your knowledge, has there ever been a challenge to the single-sex status of [girls' comprehensive school]?

Not that I know of, no. When I told you about the P.E. buildings being renovated, that was the first I'd ever heard that it might happen, and I didn't ever hear of another thing on that.

Could you just tell that story again?

Well, when I went to [girls' comprehensive], the building, quite a lot of it, had been started, and the interior of the school was a mess. What had been the English staff room became the common room, and they just put all the books out in the corridors. But they built a new P.E. area - I don't know what it was like before - and they built a new canteen there. But that was only when I first went there, and so I didn't know what it was like. When I went down to look at it, and they were showing me the plans, it had a wall cutting this change room in two. Well, I said what's that, and then the architect said, that's for the urinals. And I said why would you have urinals in a girls' school? And he said, well, for when the boys come to this school. And I said well there aren't any now, and so far as I know, there aren't going to be. He said, 'We've heard that all the schools will be becoming co-educational.' And that was 1977. And I said that it was not to my knowledge, and that it would certainly take some years to organize, I'm sure, so I'd like them not to be put in. Oh no, they have to be. But eventually, they agreed not to put them in, and they put in ordinary, or proper, toilets, but they still left the wall in between dividing the two.

In case?

The wall's still there!

That is such a great story. So what you're saying is that the understanding was that all single-sex schools would be ...

Well, that's what those architects must have thought, or the builders must have thought, - somebody did. (Interview, Harris, 2004)

Two of the last single-sex schools to be affected were Newtown Boys High School and Petersham Girls High School, which merged in 1989 to become Newtown High School of the Performing Arts. Among the later schools to cease operations as single-sex public institutions were Bankstown Boys High School (1965-1992), Crows Nest Boys High School (1936-1992), and Jannali Boys High School (1956-1992). Boys' schools were not the only ones to close. In a highly controversial decision, Cremorne

Girls High School (1941-1987) was closed for 'educational reasons' and sold to a nearby private school (Mueller, 1987, p.65). Jannali Girls High School, opened in 1953, was closed in 1991, shortly before the boys' school became a coeducational campus.

Previous chapters have suggested that the single-sex public schools' decline in numbers was accompanied by an increasing invisibility in the literature. The testimony of some historical informants provides further evidence that they were marginalised in policy terms throughout the critical era of the 1970s and 1980s. Towards the end of the critical era identified in this chapter, the NSW Director-General of Education established an independent review committee with the following terms of reference:

- to assess critically the current research findings, particularly Australian-based research, that provides evidence about the value or otherwise of single-sex classes in coeducational schools;
- to determine the extent of single-sex provisions in coeducational high schools;
- to identify factors contributing both historically and recently to the single-sex strategy in schools;
- to describe the impact of the single-sex strategy on students, teachers and parents, in a small number of case study schools;
- to assess the future potential of the single-sex strategy, in comparison to other available initiatives, to counter sexism and increase the participation and achievement of girls and boys with a view to reasonable guidelines for use in schools (DEET, 1988, p.35).

This review was carried out 'in the context of the enduring patterns of girls' stereotyped subject choices and the widespread move to coeducation in state schools' (p.35). The findings were that single-sex classes existed in many coeducational settings and had proven to be a useful strategy. There was no mention in the report of the NSW single-sex schools, nor any comparison with their students' uptake of non-traditional subjects.

4.2.3 A critical era in England and Wales

It is interesting to compare the New South Wales experience with developments in England and Wales, where the single-sex government school provision was reduced to a quarter of its former size. The critical era in England and Wales also appears to have its origins in the early 1960s but occurred more rapidly than in Australia. In the early 1960s there were 1400 girls' schools and the same number of boys' schools in the government high school systems of England and Wales. 77 per cent of secondary schools were coeducational by 1975. In 1978, British researcher Eileen Byrne argued for a national debate on the single-sex and coeducational options within government systems. Likewise, Goodman (2004, p.160, citing Shaw, 1987), asserts that,

Although there was no DES guidance or circular on the matter, no position from the Association of Education Committees and no government investigation, in almost all education authorities the move from single-sex schooling to mixed schooling as part of comprehensive re-organisation occurred with very little discussion.

Other researchers claim that 'one of the most potentially damaging consequences of the shift to comprehensives – the closing or amalgamating of many single-sex schools – passed almost unnoticed' (Deem, 1981, p.137). Deem (1981) suggests there is a need for the state to legitimise and defend its activities. At times, she writes, it can be necessary for the state 'to repress opposition to these activities', particularly if a policy is not well received (p.132). In this sense, one effective strategy is to minimise references in public discourse. The increasingly marginal status of the single-sex public schools in post-1960s discourse is arguably an example of this.

4.3 Research and single-sex education policy

In seeking to understand the enduring appeal of the New South Wales single-sex public schools, it is necessary to consider past policy contexts, especially those of the critical era identified in this study. A key question arises about the relationship between research and policy-making relating to this particular provision. As explained in earlier chapters, this study relies on both archival documents and on the testimony of key figures who were witnesses to the period in which changes to educational policy impacted most heavily on the single-sex public high schools.

The relevance of oral history for this study lies in what Whitty and Edwards (1994, p.15) call the need to ‘regard the study of education policy as involving the study both of detail and of broad trends.’ As already mentioned, the policy commitment to the comprehensive school model (the broad trend) came to dominate the discourse in a manner that marginalised the single-sex option (the policy detail) both in practice and in theory. The relationship between research and policy can be probed by assessing the nature and potency of single-sex issues at the political level, as well as in the research literature. In the absence of ample written records, the approach in this study has been to extrapolate from the broad policy climate in order to understand the effects on the single-sex schools.

A federal report commissioned in the 1980s includes evidence that ‘school systems were failing to meet their most urgent educational problems’ (Stroobant, 1989, p.145). One problem listed in the study included the education of girls. The report also warns that Australia was ‘beginning to recognise the high price it had been paying for its heavy dependence upon overseas educational research and studies’ (p.145).

Even as the British single-sex public school provision was being significantly reduced, Deem (1981, p.137) noted that ‘the assumption that mixed schooling is preferable on academic grounds is not well supported by educational research.’ The impact of broad trends in education during this period is further described by Cowell (1981, p.165), who concludes that, ‘educational systems in the United Kingdom and most liberal societies have taken it for granted over the last few decades that coeducational schools are as desirable in our new egalitarian age as are mixed-ability

classes.’ However, he suggests that there is evidence of ‘some doubt in the minds of those concerned with the individual attainment levels of girls and boys’ (p.165). Cowell’s (1981, p.167) review of international literature states that a closer look at the evidence ‘may help us to avoid repeating American mistakes in our own schools’, implying the uncertain, and non-local, basis on which policy appeared to rest. In particular, that review emphasises that the failure of coeducation to truly emancipate women and improve the relationship between the sexes provided some support for retaining separate schooling for students from adolescence through the early teenage years (Cowell, 1981). Powell and Powell (1983, p.55), writing about American trends, reflect that ‘[i]t is ironic that in our headlong rush to open up educational opportunities for girls we have virtually closed down a powerful traditional option – the single-sex school. Coeducation has been elevated to the status of “natural” or “normal”.’ Canadian researchers Schneider and Coutts (1982, p.898) also caution that,

[i]t stands to reason that in order to achieve an understanding of the effects of the two kinds of institutions on their students, a thorough analysis of their respective environments is required. Yet, strikingly little research, particularly in North America [United States and Canada], has been conducted, a state of affairs that undoubtedly is related to the declining availability of single-sex schools.

Gill (1988, p.10) says that in comparison to the studies supporting coeducation ‘Australian work in the area of single sex schooling and achievement has been more scattered.’ In her view, a further complication is that ‘the British origins of so many senior Australian education administrators and academics’ had skewed researchers’ attention to the point where differences in the English-speaking countries, including the United States, are glossed over ‘with the implication that the school situation here will be highly similar’ (p.2).

The invisibility of the existing single-sex schools is reflected in the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1975, p.63) report which describes the segregation of male and female students as ‘the most fundamental expression of differing sex expectations.’ The status of the single-sex government schools is reflected in the absence of any references in *A Dictionary of Australian Education*, which offers a lexicological overview of the period. There are no references to boys’ schools or single-sex schools, except for one definition given for Girls Secondary School: ‘Name used in

Victoria for schools offering non-academic secondary courses to girls ... many of them have now become girls' high schools or co-educational secondary schools' (McLaren, 1974, p.112).

However, the schools receive some minor mention in an Australian government report to UNESCO (1979) which concludes that,

The majority of government schools are co-educational, and in recent years there has been a trend towards converting the minority of single-sex schools remaining (which are almost exclusively secondary) into co-education institutions. The present policies of schools authorities do not favour the establishment of single-sex government schools. (Commonwealth Department of Education, 1981, p.1)

A former New South Wales Minister for Education acknowledged the issue in the early 1970s, when he stated that, '[t]he government is anxious to do more in regard to educational research. We are aware of the heavy demands for educational research; also of the relatively limited manpower in this vital area' (Willis, 1973, p.8).

Yates (1996) maintains that since the early 1970s, 'we have seen in Australia what is, by international standards, a huge amount of attention, research, policy-making and even funding concerned with girls and schooling or with equal opportunity matters related to gender' (p.3). However, it is difficult to defend any suggestion that a research focus on the classroom experiences of female students can be equated with a broad-ranging investigation of single-sex public schooling. There is little indication of any research attempting to understand the enduring phenomenon of single-sex public schools. One notable exception is found in a study from South Australia in which Feather (1974) questions the basis for local decision-making regarding single-sex education. His own investigation of eight single-sex and coeducational high schools originated from a concern about how few such studies had been conducted.

Despite the widespread acceptance of co-education within the state secondary systems, no rationale underlying its introduction has been made explicit. In pragmatic fashion, the practice of combining the sexes within the primary school and the country high school has, since 1945, been generally extended to the metropolitan areas. In some of the capital cities only a few academic high schools remain, by weight of tradition and because of the physical problems of conversion, single-sex institutions.

In future investigations, one might employ finer grain measures in the hope that they would be more responsive to the effects of co-education and, if possible, take a much wider samples of different types of school, both single-sex and co-educational. In the foreseeable future, however, finding a single-sex school within the state school system might (as one headmaster put it) be like looking for a sabre-toothed tiger. Moreover, the move towards co-education in Australia is a general one now beginning to extend to some of the independent schools as well. Hence the present study is in the unique position of presenting information about a division that is rapidly disappearing. (p.15)

On the other hand, there is some evidence of an official view that the onus was on coeducational schools to prove their worth. Acknowledging the importance of monitoring the effects of the new model and the complexity of that task, a federal report warns that,

Any study of the advantages of co-education must take particular care to control these variables: socioeconomic status of pupils, school size, pupils' measured abilities, teachers' qualifications and experience, and school facilities and resources. (Australia. Schools Commission, 1975, p.78)

One former New South Wales Minister for Education (1976-1980), an informant in this study, expresses some uncertainty about the basis for decision-making in respect of single-sex public schools.

Well, my recollection is that it was in response to community demand. People knew that there was a move on to go to co-educational schools. There was still lots of argument and debate about it, and I must say as a former teacher in the schools I see pros and cons. And I must say that, philosophically, I wasn't as wedded to what Wyndham wanted to do as perhaps the departmental officers were. My view was, it's a good thing and it will happen, but we're not going to ride hard on it. But again, if caucus had decided that we were going

to accelerate this, then we'd have started pushing. But the pushing then is that the Minister's office would be saying to the Director-General, 'Well, we want some information now. There are schools here and here that ought to be co-ed; let's get to work on it.'

So it would have been a top-down instruction?

Oh, I'm sure yes. Yes.

I'm also wondering about the link with any of the educational research that might have been around at the time?

What sort is that?

The studies that had been done by people like Dale, for example, talking about the advantages of co-education over single-sex and so on. Did politicians or bureaucrats, or people in the [NSW] Teachers' Federation refer to that sort of material when they were debating issues... of any kind?

They probably did, though I must say I can't remember. I'm sure they would have in order to make their case. They'd be referring to work that had been done on it. And as I say, no one needed convincing that it was all right, but as I say, it just enjoyed a low priority. There was no real pressure on. As far as Labor Party policy's concerned, I suppose all premiers are the same. But Neville Wran [then Premier of NSW] had a system where - it might have been every three months or every six months - you had to send a note across to the Premier's department on what Labor policy you were working on, what were the policy documents, what are you doing, what do you still want to do? We had to keep them advised on how things were going on policy. And again, your own sub-committees would be asking for items to go onto the agenda and things to speak about at those subcommittee meetings. Again, as I say, we didn't get much about single-sex schools. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

The Minister's references to not being aware of 'much about single-sex schools' and that 'no one needed convincing' about the adoption of coeducation gives some sense of the position of the single-sex public schools in educational discourse. This study notes that despite increased funding to state education bureaucracies, with tied grants for research, a federal report concluded that '[b]y the mid-1970s, there was a general view that the research had not lived up to expectations in its contribution to policy development' (NBEET, 1992, p.56).

Another report from that decade, which followed a national conference of educators, includes the statement that,

Despite the growth of research development in Australia ... major education policy decisions are only marginally influenced by research and development. Very often the decision is made and selective research data are used to legitimize the decision. Alternatively, evaluations are carried out with the data selectively gathered to justify the policy. (Shellard, 1979, p.14)

Collins et al (2000, p.18) maintain that, 'There is a strong tradition of Australian policy and research on gender equity and schooling that dates back to 1975 and the publication of the Commonwealth Schools' Commission's landmark report *Girls School and Society* (Yates, 1993; Kenway, 1990).' Examination of the relevant publications reveals an ongoing concern with gender issues in education as they relate to girls' achievement. Hayes (1998, p.1) points to the replacement of discourses of differential provision by those proposing equitable provision.

Since schooling remains primarily the responsibility of Australia's six States and two Territories (although the Federal Government allocated funds for this purpose), the development of a national policy in education is only possible if there is mutual agreement and collaboration between the Federal Government, the States and Territories. The consensus required to formulate the *National Policy for the Education of Girls* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987) indicates the level of commitment of politicians at that time to gender equity reform, and hence the degree of community concern.

Policy statements and initiatives in New South Wales also reflect the dominant themes. A subsequent report was known as *Sexism in Education* (1977), which in turn inspired a Non-Sexist Education Policy (1978). In 1979 this was revised to become the paper titled *Towards Non-Sexist Education*, which was the basis for the creation of a Non-Sexist Education Unit within the Department of Education. In 1986 the *Girls' Technology Strategy* was released. This was followed by the *Girls' Education Strategy* (1989, p.3), which claimed its 'overall purpose [as being] to improve the educational outcomes from the schooling of girls.' This document confirms differences in outcomes between the sexes based on research undertaken throughout the decade. It refers to the deliberate strategy in some coeducational schools of introducing single-sex classes for girls, because, it states, '[w]ell managed,

the single-sex strategy has some beneficial effects, particularly but not exclusively for girls' (p.8). None of the abovementioned papers discuss the NSW single-sex public schools as educational alternatives.

The notion of providing choice in an increasingly diverse education market provides some explanation for the survival of a small number of single-sex schools in the public sector. A NSW Government review (1989, p.256) proposed the following arrangements for public schools:

- Recommendation 13.7.7.5

While co-educational schools might be regarded as the norm, a number of single-sex schools be maintained to enable parental freedom of choice.

- Recommendation 13.7.7.6

In co-educational schools, where deemed desirable, special single-sex girls' classes be experimented with in subjects such as science and mathematics where some girls may appear to suffer learning disadvantages.

The effects of this changed policy climate can be discovered in the nature of the research into gender issues in education. Girls were no longer to be seen as one homogenous group and other factors such as class and ethnicity were considered when examining the students' outcomes and experiences. According to Collins et al (2000, p.21) there was more interest in the relative merits of single-sex and mixed schooling in the 1980s than there had been in earlier decades.

[The 1970s were] followed in the 1980s by a focus on the specific learning needs and styles of girls as a group compared to boys as a group: here the language emphasised an education which was 'girl-friendly' and a 'sexually-inclusive' curriculum that was responsive to girls' interests and learning styles.

However, as Gill (2004, p.80) notes, '[t]hrough the 1980s the orientation in the gender and schooling literature was still very much single-sex schools from the point of view of girls; education – no mention here of single-sex schools for boys.'

4.4 Changing assumptions about gender and education

The 1970s, according to Hayes (1998), marked a period in which English-speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand replaced premeditated gender and class-based differentiation with discourses about more equitable provision. The 1972 election of a federal Australian Labor Government, after decades of conservative leadership, provided a political context that was conducive to debates about sexism as well as changing assumptions about gender and schooling (Johnson, 2002; Yates, 1996). Deem (1981, p.136) maintains that the equivalent period in the United Kingdom came ‘under the banner of a social democratic ideology, having its roots in the increased economic growth and general affluence ...[and] saw a massive extension of the social services, intended to attack the structural roots of inequality and poverty’. Earlier sections mentioned the similar experiences of nations with shared world views. The current study stresses the significance for the single-sex public schools of an ideological shift throughout the Western world in which monetary policies were underpinned by new notions of equality of opportunity for all citizens and a belief that education could take the lead in breaking down social divisions (Marginson, 1993).

D’Cruz and Sheehan’s (1975) analysis of the effects on educational planning posits that democratic nations moved on from a purely meritocratic philosophy to one that focused on individual needs and abilities. A practical expression of this shift involved ‘positive discrimination in favour of those who began with the least advantages’ (1975, p.23). Sinclair (2002, p.75), for example, states that the 1970s were characterised by a shift from a conservative, hierarchical world view to ‘needs/redemptive emphases ... aimed at optimizing opportunities for all and attempting to overcome disadvantage.’ As the largest group to be so classified, females thus came to be regarded as a minority group in need of compensatory attention.

Yates (1996, p.5) discusses reformist visions that linked equal opportunity with moves to turn existing single-sex schools in co-educational institutions. She says that ‘[t]he aim, explicitly, is to make “sex difference” something that schools do not reinforce.’ Given that the single-sex model had been the vehicle for a differentiated curriculum and the gender-based determination of post-school outcomes, it is conceivable that

many stakeholders came to perceive it as old-fashioned and inherently incapable of delivering equality of opportunity, at least for female students. Certainly, many girls' schools were poorly resourced, found it difficult to recruit staff and struggled to compete in an increasingly diverse education market. In the 1970s, therefore, the emphasis on girls as disadvantaged subjects resulted in the identification of boys and girls as two unitary categories, for whom the solution to the question of equality of opportunity in education lay in ensuring identical provision (mixed schools).

Some researchers (Hayes, 1998; Yates, 1996) refer to this decade as having created the 'educationally disadvantaged subject' in the sense that 'in Australian schools girls were not being prepared for the full range of educational experiences and academic achievements typical of their male peers' (Gill, 1988, p.6). According to Francis (2000, p.4) the research 'presented a grim picture of rampant gender inequality in the classroom'. Collins et al (2000, p.21) claim that,

In the 1970s the focus was on the elimination of sexism and the idea of girls as 'equally human': key phrases here included encouraging 'non-sexist' attitudes and language, 'equal opportunities' for all, and 'non-traditional' curriculum and career choices and working against 'sex-role stereotyping'.

The first generation of women to be promised equality, Middleton (1990, p.149) suggests, was affected when the 'second wave of feminism crashed across the western world in the late 1960s and early 1970s.' The feminist movement challenged traditional discourses with new theories to explain gender relations. Second-wave feminism was determined to address gender-based inequalities in participation and outcomes for girls. In the English-speaking world this was reflected largely in the liberal feminist rejection of segregated schooling and gendered curricula.

According to Marshall (2000, p.126), whose studies include interviews with key figures of the era, the gender equity movement was led by "femocrats" – feminists who were high officials in government bureaucracies, or were teacher union activists, scholars and educators with tasks for implementing gender policies'. She quotes an informant as saying that 'different people and groups have forced the community to create a dialogue about gender' (p.126). There is evidence that feminist researchers and teacher union activists sought to make gender the focus of education policy

(Martinez, 2003; Taylor, 2001; Francis, 2000; Pocock, 1998). As part of her investigation of how feminist discourses were introduced to educational policy agendas, Taylor (2001), for example, interviewed teacher union activists who were active in Queensland during the 1970s and 1980s. She found that their experience of networking with sympathetic bureaucrats at state level had been one of the most successful strategies. It is interesting to compare this with the situation in New South Wales, where the preservation of career opportunities for women formed part of the argument for hastening slowly on the introduction of coeducation. As one historical informant noted,

It was most significant that the single-sex schools provided an avenue of promotion for women which enabled them not to have to go to remote parts, or wherever, in order to become principals...there were many top-level who, because they weren't in a position to follow the dictates of the system, would never reach principal level. So this was an avenue which in the past had enabled many outstanding women such as Zelma Bocking at Burwood Girls High School and Bess Mitchell at Cheltenham Girls, to reach those positions and have that influence. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

During this critical era, five annual reports were produced to evaluate the implementation of the *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (Commonwealth, 1987). Each report contains a section devoted to policy developments in each state. None of these reports makes any reference to educational research relating to single-sex education. The existing single-sex schools are not mentioned.

Reflecting on the scope of the National Policy, Taylor (2001) emphasises its significance as a means of having feminist discourses legitimised. It is interesting to note that Taylor's (2001) investigation of gender equity activism in Queensland reveals that girls' schools had higher union membership than coeducational schools, and that more women were involved in teacher unions than men. While the National Policy was intended to inform the issues around equality of opportunity on a state by state basis, Martinez (2003, p.4) says the reports were 'a sorry representation of the story on the ground, and to some extent, reflect the inability of systems to capture the significant educational effects of policies in schools.' In her analysis of two decades of gender equity policy, Johnson (2002) also expresses reservations. While stressing

that the Policy, endorsed by each State Minister for Education, stipulated gender inclusiveness as a responsibility of all Australian schools, she observes that ‘this policy platform was produced at some distance from schools as its developments was funded through the layers of various state bureaucracies’ (p.6).

One historical informant’s final appointment as principal took place at a time when women were still appointed to girls’ schools and men to boys’ schools, although both sexes could lead coeducational schools. Women were thought of as ‘lesser beings’ but, she claims, ‘a lot of those women principals would have said, “We’re not going to have men in our schools”’ (Interview, Harris, 2004). In Goodman’s (1994, p.162) summation, the 1970s reinforced stereotypical views of women’s inability to lead a mixed comprehensive or large school, let alone an all-boys’ school’. The situation in New South Wales became increasingly complex as the feminist movement agitated for equal opportunity in public sector employment. Interestingly, the traditional appointment of male principals to boys’ schools and female principals to girls’ schools was challenged by three men, leading to a judicial hearing in Sydney in the 1980s. According to a former senior bureaucrat,

The Department decided that women would have preference for the girls’ schools, and men for the boys’. And the Director-General decided that and consented to it. But it was never put in the regulations to the Act and so it was challenged in court because it was not legal. But of course I had acted and made the appointments as Assistant Director-General, under delegated authority, for what had been gazetted as the Director-General’s policy. But his policy had never been really codified and put in regulation and therefore was not able to withstand a challenge. (Interview, Winder, 2004)

On the other hand, Connell (1980), who also describes the 1970s as a critical period for education, suggests that it marked the beginning of a realisation that the provision of identical mixed-school facilities would not automatically result in equality of opportunity for all members of the community. Notably, one of the few groups to support the continued provision of single-sex schools for girls were radical feminists, whose objection to coeducation rested on the notion that the existing system was masculinised and could never be expected to deliver equitable schooling.

4.4.1 Policy pragmatism

Earlier in this chapter it was explained that the adoption of the comprehensive coeducational school model led directly to the decline in the number of single-sex public schools. As this decline was most pronounced during the 1970s and 1980s, these decades have been identified as a critical era for the single-sex provision, characterised by a lack of research emphasis on the nature and role of the schools. It is important to revisit the suggestion that the discursive marginalisation of these schools may in fact provide some explanation for their endurance. According to one historical informant, there was no urgency to implement universal coeducation because other issues had taken priority.

How was policy actually developed with regard to either the group of single-sex schools, or individual schools? You're saying that it really would have started on a case-by-case basis?

Absolutely.

The Department would have responded to an initiative from an area or a school, is that right?

Yes. That's right.

So there wasn't a deep belief – in your government anyway – that all schools should become as Wyndham had intended - comprehensive, coeducational institutions?

That's right. Well, with some members it would certainly have been, with some individual members of caucus. But it was not a major issue, as I say. We were very focused on the Education Commission. The other thing- and I guess that also relates a bit to the time I had in schools, especially at Liverpool Boys' High School – was to do something about kids from other parts of the world, and multicultural education. And so we were concentrating on that. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

This is reinforced by a former New South Wales Director-General of Education, who explains that,

Well, the Policy and Planning Unit had the requirement to implement government policy. It was their charter and they could not be seen to be ignoring it. On the other hand, they had to also consider a whole host of other priorities and that [moving to co-education] was certainly one that was being

looked at. The procedure there would be that if they thought it was worthy of movement – and these were senior officers – then they would, in consultation with the regional director, look at the proposals and then put them into some sort of priority order for myself and the Minister, as to what we should do. Some of those things would not get to the Minister because I was not prepared to submit them, against all of the other demands that we had. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

Proctor (2005, p.2) contends that '[i]n common with schooling systems elsewhere in the world, co-education in New South Wales high schools was a means to an end rather than an educational philosophy in itself.' The competing demands referred to in the previous interview interfered with the implementation of the comprehensive, coeducational model. In this way, the issue was sidelined and the schools themselves became increasingly invisible.

As argued earlier, a characteristic of this critical era was the absence of clear-cut statements regarding the nature and role of single-sex schools within public education. The policy conundrum was not confined to New South Wales. For example, a conference held in South Australia in 1981 focused on the provision of single-sex schools in that State, with one speaker stating that 'in pragmatic terms, public funding is not going to accommodate large numbers of single-sex schools within a State system. What the system is doing at the moment is saying yes we'll have diversity within the system and we will maintain three single-sex schools within what is largely a co-educational school structure' (Wallace, 1984, p.8).

The same report also found that 'co-education is seen to offer the most cost-efficient form of school provision, and the amalgamation of single sex schools, such as has been happening in New South Wales, appears to be undertaken in the interests of economic efficiency' (p.6). This fits with the remarks of a former Minister for Education (1984-1988) who claimed that much of the decision-making was motivated by 'a bringing of a great discipline to public sector spending' (Interview, Cavalier, 2003).

It is interesting to consider the experience of Cremorne Girls High School students and staff in this regard. A letter to the Assistant Director-General of Education from the relevant regional director stated that the decision to amalgamate Cremorne GHS

with a local comprehensive, co-educational high school was ‘the most logical course of action to achieve an appropriate rationalization of secondary education services in the area and the greatest improvement in school facilities in the most economic way’ (Reid, T., 8 May 1985). However, a newspaper article reported that Cremorne was to be sold to make way ‘for a million dollar development program centered on the school site in the late 1970s, when enrolment trends were showing their most marked decline’ (*The Sun Herald*, 20 May 1985, p.6). Some months later, another newspaper article claimed that,

Cremorne is a case of an excellent, 400 strong school being closed for lack of students. It lacks students because deliberate policy starved it of students and by this logic teachers were withdrawn or denied. (*The Weekend Australian*, August 10-11, 1985, p.19)

In the case of Cremorne, a major objection from the parents and students was that its closure would remove the single-sex school option from a sizeable community. The site was sold to a private school in the late 1980s.

5 The single-sex public high schools of New South Wales: a contemporary context

The idea that everybody is equal is unfortunately no longer relevant and in reality people want what is best for their kid and if they see that the best is down the road they will take their child there. (Interview, former NSW Deputy-Director General (Schools), 2005)

5.1 Introduction

One of the themes of this study, as discussed in earlier chapters, is that the history of the single-sex schools is closely linked with the evolution of public education in New South Wales. It follows that these schools can be employed as a unique lens through which to scrutinise past and present trends in the New South Wales government system. As a former principal of single-sex and coeducational schools claimed: ‘Nothing happens in a vacuum!’ (Interview, Armstrong, 2002)

This chapter builds on the previous analysis of a critical era in which the single-sex public school option diminished and was replaced by the comprehensive, coeducational model. That analysis emphasised the watershed nature of the Wyndham Report in terms of the reorganization of New South Wales secondary schooling and the subsequent impact upon the traditional provision of single-sex alternatives. Put simply, the Report recommended replacing the vocationally-oriented streaming of children into a diverse range of secondary schools with a scheme that offered a common curriculum to students of all abilities who would be enrolled from designated school drawing areas (Hughes, 2001; Wyndham, 1957). As the intended mechanism for a levelling of class differences, the comprehensive school model was positioned within discourses around equality of opportunity. However, as explained in the last chapter, the Wyndham Report’s recommendation of coeducation as the ‘general rule’ did not explicitly preclude the retention or establishment of single-sex schools.

The focus of this chapter is an examination of the broad context in which the surviving single-sex schools are currently sustained and maintained within the New South Wales government sector. It is important to understand that most of these schools – thirty-three of the forty-six – belong to the larger group of comprehensive public high schools. That is, they are neither academically selective nor do they offer

any specialist curricular focus. Given that the bulk of the public high school provision is comprehensive and coeducational, this chapter sets the single-sex alternatives within a contemporary ideological context that does not readily accommodate selectivity by gender.

The contention is that, with the exception of a few schools that carry some other distinction (i.e. academic selectivity), the remainder of the single-sex provision continues to occupy a marginalised space in the government school system. In a reference to the ideological shift which, this study asserts, has made the single-sex alternative largely invisible since the implementation of the Wyndham Scheme, a Sydney newspaper editorial noted that,

Comprehensive co-educational schools have been the core of the government school system for more than 40 years. Many parents are persuaded to choose them by social arguments: they believe the more normal social environment prepares children better for life and work in a two-sex world. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2005, p.16)

As will be seen later in this study, there is evidence that some aspects of the current education context are encouraging the single-sex schools themselves to claim a renewed and unique role in the delivery of public education. However, the aforementioned article illustrates the strength of the post-Wyndham commitment to the comprehensive, coeducational model.

Other major contextual influences such as the ideology of choice, the development of a competitive education market, changing consumer aspirations and the decentralisation of the public system are also considered in these sections. In this way, this chapter provides the basis for a focus on a sample of single-sex schools, which follows in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. In keeping with the methodological approach used throughout this study, both oral and written sources are cited to explain how and why the single-sex schools endure.

5.2 Single-sex schools as part of the New South Wales public school provision

According to the most recent edition of the Department of Education and Training's (2003) official history,

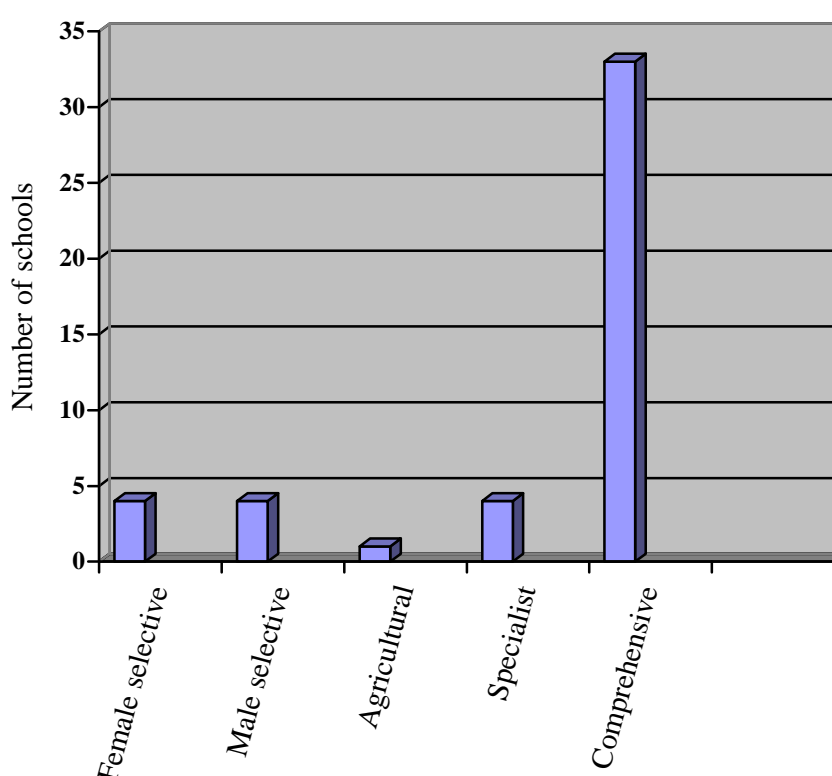
With the exception of selective High Schools (there are 24 selective High Schools and 4 Agricultural High Schools in 2002)¹ and the special schools, the secondary school system today consists almost entirely of comprehensive high schools and the secondary sections of Central Schools in country areas. (*Government Schools of New South Wales 1848 – 2003*, p. 12)

As detailed in the DET's 2005 *Directory*, the secondary education system comprised 395 high schools and 66 central schools. Of the high schools, ten per cent are single-sex schools; 24 for girls and 22 for boys only. The current single-sex provision, as shown in Figure 5.1, includes eight fully academically selective schools (four girls' and four boys' schools), one agricultural high school for boys², three technology high schools (one for girls; two for boys), one language high school and thirty-three comprehensive schools that carry no specialist nomenclature.

¹ In 2005 this provision consisted of 17 fully selective high schools and 4 agricultural high schools offering selective places, as well as nine high schools and one senior high school offering some selective classes. (Source: NSW Department of Education and Training (Types of Public Schools, retrieved on 16 June 2005 from www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/selectiveschools.php)

² Farrer Memorial High School caters for day students and boarders. It is selective in the sense that the curriculum has a compulsory agriculture component in Years 7-10 and the school gives preference to students who have an interest in agricultural and/science-based careers.

Figure 5.1 – Types of single-sex schools



Further analysis revealed that the single-sex group consists of nine pairs of campuses that share the same name, with the only difference being the use of ‘Girls’ or ‘Boys’. Most of these are co-located, as was the case with the earliest academic high schools.³ Twelve pairs claim at least a nominal partnership with a school catering for the opposite sex, and are located within reasonable distances from each other. Three girls’ schools and one boys’ school have no identifiable partner schools.

Table 5.1 provides a more detailed view of the state-wide distribution of the single-sex schools.⁴ The ten administrative regions under the jurisdiction of the New South Wales Department of Education are shown here, together with a further breakdown of each region into its smaller administrative areas. As can be seen, four of these regions are located in the Sydney metropolitan area.

Table 5.1 – Location of NSW single-sex public schools

³ Sydney Boys High School and Sydney Girls High School (est. 1883)

⁴ This table refers only to standard New South Wales secondary schools that include the designators ‘high’ or ‘central’ in their names.

See print copy for table 5.1

According to a NSW Public Education Council (2005, p.114) report, '[t]he strengths of NSW public schools are their accessibility and diversity.' However, as is demonstrated in Table 5.1, the single-sex schools' geographic concentration in the Sydney metropolitan area limits their accessibility. One former Director-General of Education insists that stakeholders '[n]ote the location' (Interview, Swan, 2004). As highlighted in the previous chapter, few single-sex high schools were established in country areas, and all were academically selective. At the time of the current study, the sole single-sex option outside Sydney is one boys' agricultural high school located in far northern New South Wales.

This study has already suggested that it is possible to link the continued, albeit highly restricted, availability of the single-sex schools back to the Wyndham Report. With regard to the current levels of access to single-sex public schools, it is interesting to consider that document's conclusion that,

We are aware that conditions in a particular locality may be such as to call for some modification of this general rule [all new secondary schools to be coeducational], especially if there is a real difference in public opinion on the matter. (Wyndham, 1957, p.81)

Evidence was provided in earlier chapters of the preponderance of coeducational schools in country areas. While earlier chapters discussed the strong community support for longstanding, high-demand facilities such as Newcastle Girls and Boys High Schools, it is arguable that any 'real difference in public opinion' was more a feature of the larger metropolitan centres, where public education had traditionally emphasised the single-sex structure. Throughout this study it is claimed that evidence of the enduring appeal of the single-sex schools can be found in their substantial enrolment of out-of-area students. It is suggested that the willingness of students to travel long distances to attend single-sex schools represents considerable 'difference in public opinion.' Although country students have almost no access to the single-sex public school option, in the current context the significant movement of students across the Sydney metropolitan area reflects support for this school type.

Under the heading *Secondary Schools – General*, visitors to the DET's website are advised that, 'Our high schools provide students in Years 7 to 12 with a quality education in a broad range of subjects. They can be co-educational or single-sex.'⁵ The website offers a guide to *Finding A Public School*, where all types of public schools are listed.⁶ The single-sex schools are not identified as a separate group.

- Government Preschools
- Infants Schools K–2
- Primary Schools K–6
- Primary Schools with opportunity classes
- Central and Community Schools K–12
- Secondary Schools – general
- Secondary Schools – selective high schools

⁵ www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/secondaryschools.php, retrieved on 17 June 2005

⁶ www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/index.php, retrieved on 8 June 2006

- Secondary Schools – technology high schools
- Secondary Schools – sports high schools
- Secondary Schools – senior high schools and colleges
- Secondary Schools – collegiates
- Secondary Schools – language schools
- Secondary Schools – creative and performing arts
- Schools for specific purposes
- Distance Education Centres
- Saturday School of Community Languages

Similarly, the 2005 Directory (p.49) lists some secondary institutions under the heading ‘Specialist Secondary Schools’. This section explains that ‘Some secondary schools have a special focus, either in curriculum or in the nature of the student enrolment.’ This listing makes no reference to the single-sex schools.

Using the DET’s website, another way to search for the single-sex schools is to go through the lists in alphabetical order, or by postcode and education region. The nomenclature of Farrer Memorial Agricultural High School and Sydney Technical High School means they are not immediately identifiable as all-boys’ schools.

Under *Procedures for Enrolment in Particular Circumstances (Single-Sex High School Placement)* prospective education consumers are advised that places are available at these schools for students who reside within the designated enrolment area and that students from outside the designated area can be enrolled only if accommodation is available and if they meet other policy criteria, particularly if the school is also a selective or specialist institution (NSW DET, 1997).

The High School Enrolment Application Form (2004), relating to all non-selective and most specialist high schools, stipulates that prospective students must ‘provide reasons for seeking non-local placement’, which could include:

- proximity and access to the school
- brothers and sisters already enrolled at the school
- access to single-sex or coeducation
- medical reasons
- safety and supervision of the student before and after school
- special interests and abilities
- compassionate circumstances
- structure and organisation of the school.

It is important to note that every student who has access to a local single-sex high school also has the option of enrolling at a local coeducational school.⁷ The reverse is not the case, because, as this study has demonstrated, the number and geographical distribution of single-sex schools are limited. For most New South Wales students, therefore, the local or ‘neighbourhood’ school is comprehensive and coeducational.

5.3 Aspects of the current context of New South Wales public education

A recurring theme in the statements from New South Wales education authorities and other stakeholders concerns the perceived threat to what a NSW Teachers’ Federation executive has called ‘a defining institution in Australian society’ (Gavrielatos, 2004, p.2). An appreciation of the status of the single-sex public high schools of New South Wales is enhanced by some initial observations of the general educational climate in which they currently operate. This chapter starts from the premise that one of the major influences on today’s public schools is an increasingly competitive educational marketplace (Campbell & Sherington, 2004; Groundwater-Smith, 2001; Smith, 1996).

New South Wales is not unique in this context. All public education systems across the nation have experienced a marked decline in student numbers. In 1977, 78.9 per cent of Australian children were in public schools. By 1989, the figure was 72.4 per cent and by 2001 it had fallen to 68 per cent (ABS, 2006). This decline continued into the new century, with the number of fulltime students attending government schools across Australia down to 67.1 per cent in August 2005 (ABS, 2006). Campbell and Sherington’s (2004, p.1) sizeable survey of comprehensive school principals found that, taking into account the diversity of the provision across New South Wales, where the educational market is strong ‘the comprehensive government high schools suffer considerable disadvantage’.

As mentioned in previous chapters, taxpayer support for non-government schools has been a characteristic of New South Wales education. Evidence of the longstanding nature of the debate over government funding can be found in a twenty-year-old editorial from Australia’s only national newspaper, which points out that,

⁷ This does not include the academically selective single-sex schools, which only admit students who have passed specific entry requirements.

The perennial State Aid argument is just one sign of the continuing debate within Australia over what sort of educational policies will best equip our children to deal with the future. Funding is just one part of educational policy and is at times given too much prominence to the neglect of other more elusive policy issues. (*The Australian*, 26 May 1986, p.10)

The above editorial was published during what has been identified as a critical era for the New South Wales single-sex public schools (see Chapter 4). A later section of the same editorial states that,

Australia's system of State and private education does provide a good deal of diversity among our schools. This is good in principle as it maximizes parental choice. It also allows more experimentation than a monolithic system would. Parents can shop around for the school which best suits their children's abilities, while State supervision of broad curriculum guidelines means that the education system as a whole retains coherence...Australia needs schools which preserve standards of academic excellence in an orderly and civilized environment, but which are also dynamic and flexible in choosing various educational techniques to achieve these ends. Greater parental choice among schools, and a stronger and more individualistic role for school principals, are two imperatives which ought to be encouraged. (*The Australian*, 26 May 1986, p.10)

Considering that the editorial dates back twenty years, its advocacy of differentiated schooling on the grounds of providing parents with greater choice contrasts strongly with the commitment to the comprehensive, coeducational model associated with the post-Wyndham critical era. It is interesting to compare that perspective with a more recent analysis from an organization established to advise the government on the state of public education in New South Wales.⁸

Public high schools are increasingly under pressure from changing demographic patterns and increasing choice and competition in the education marketplace fuelled by changing economic and social conditions and the increasing funding by the Commonwealth of non-government schooling...The Public Education Council recognises the challenges involved in

⁸ The 13-member Public Education Council was established in 2003 by the New South Wales Government and chaired by Ms Lyndsay Connors. The Council produced a report on public education entitled 'Building on Strong Foundations'. It wound up in 2005.

confronting these issues as well as the efforts invested in many initiatives over recent years to find ways of arresting these trends. It also recognises that these challenges have existed for several decades and are not unique to New South Wales. (Public Education Council, 2005, p.115)

The juxtaposition of these two perspectives provides further evidence of the incomplete implementation of a comprehensive system of public education. Aside from the fact that differentiation continued to be a feature of New South Wales government schools, as manifested in the retention of single-sex alternatives, it seems clear that the Wyndham Scheme either did not receive the community support for which it might have hoped in the first place, or else, as Hughes (2001, p.2) writes, 'the earlier system-wide commitment to the comprehensive model has dissipated.' For the purposes of this study, however, it is important to see the single-sex schools as one variant in an increasingly diverse public education system, which, in turn, comprises one element of the contemporary schooling context.

5.3.1 The ‘neighbourhood comprehensive’ school

Any analysis of the public provision of secondary education in New South Wales is predicated on an appreciation of the role of its figurehead, the ‘neighbourhood comprehensive’ school. This study places a major focus on the introduction of this model because of its impact on the traditional practice (particularly in major urban centres) of segregating the boys and girls for their secondary schooling. Previous chapters have referred in detail to the ideological shift that underpinned the recommendations of the Wyndham Report, which in turn led to the adoption of the Education Act 1961. While the Report expresses the preference for all future secondary schools to be coeducational, it also states that the single-sex alternative should be available as a response to some communities’ ‘particular circumstances’.

According to Hughes (1999, p.180), ‘[m]any argue that ... in retaining selective schools and not insisting on co-education it was not a concerted attempt at installing comprehensive education.’ In this study, therefore, it is argued that the Wyndham Report tacitly approved a differentiated provision and that this is a vital consideration in any discussion of the current status of the single-sex schools.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the 1960s and 1970s were characterised by the aim of creating a more egalitarian schooling system that would also enhance national economic prospects. The same aims are found in a statement from a former NSW Director-General of Education and Training.

Public schools continue to exist for the same reason they were created – that is, to ensure that all students, regardless of background or circumstance, have the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, understandings and values for a productive and rewarding life and to contribute to the future of our democratic society as informed citizens. There is both a personal and social purpose to public education. (Cappie-Wood, 2004, p.4)

This perspective is a strong reflection of last century’s ideological shift towards social democracy, endowing government schools with a particular communal role. Similarly, Marginson (1998) maintains that public education is perceived to have a broader social mandate than merely educating children in the mandatory curriculum.

The preferred notion of public education is that it contributes to open and democratic social relations; is tolerant and inclusive; respects difference; and is associated with egalitarian practices in which the mode of learning is solidaristic rather competitive, and the education of one is advanced by the education of all to the highest possible level of achievement. (Marginson, 1998, p.69)

Campbell and Sherington (2004, p.2) write that 'in Australia these are the schools upon which the great majority of young people remain dependent for their secondary education.' One member of the NSW Parliament recently contributed to a lengthy debate about their role, stating that,

The decision to introduce a public or comprehensive system came before Federation. It can be argued that it laid the groundwork for the democratisation of our institutions and that it helped to mould the democratic body politic. That is what public education is able to do. Public education represents and embodies the values of equal access and equal opportunity. It removes, to a larger degree, social stratification. It is a truism that education is a great equaliser, particularly education that is provided in the public system. (Saffin, 1999, p.2)

There is evidence that the interpretation of 'comprehensive' is itself problematic. Hughes (2001) claims that the various definitions of comprehensive schooling include the belief that the standard model should cater for children aged eleven to eighteen and offer a common curriculum. Others believe that as long as the school admits students across all ability levels, it can be single-sex or co-educational, public or private, and cater for some or all of the secondary years while still qualifying for the label 'comprehensive' (Cunningham & Ross, cited in Hughes, 2001). An analysis of the current provision is provided by one informant in this study, who explains that,

Well, theoretically they [single-sex public schools] are part of the comprehensive system of education. That is as the previous Director-General used to refer to them – a comprehensive system of schools, as opposed to comprehensive schools. It was semantics, because there was such a push for comprehensive schools from the Federation and everybody, but then his argument was that we have a comprehensive 'system' so within that we have selective schools, technology schools, comprehensive schools, etc. So the whole system is comprehensive, as opposed to each individual school being comprehensive. (School 6, 2004)

These schools, and other manifestations of differentiation, are evidence of a reinterpretation of the concept of comprehensiveness. In spite of their larger numbers, therefore, the comprehensive, coeducational models arguably no longer have the ideological advantage they enjoyed in the immediate post-Wyndham decades.

5.4 The ideology of school choice

The reinterpretation of comprehensiveness referred to above is made possible by the rise of an ideology of choice. In the contemporary context of education, the assumption that a majority of families will at least consider, if not actively choose, the neighbourhood comprehensive school, is not realistic. In New South Wales there was an overall decrease in public school enrolments of 4.5 per cent between 1990 and 2003. The number of students enrolled in public secondary schools decreased by 6 per cent in the same period.

Some studies of parental choice have focused on how and why parents and students choose alternatives to their attendance-zone school (NSW Parents Council Newsletter, April 2002; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Thomas et al, 1997; Ball & Gewirtz, 1997). According to Giddens (cited in Taylor & Woollard, 2003, p.624), ‘cultivating risk through the active choice of a non-designated school can provide a feeling of control in attempts to “colonize the future”.’

It is perhaps easier to determine why consumers choose against one school type than to understand their selection of an alternative. Accompanying the recent release of Australian Bureau of Statistics figures confirming the continuing drift to the non-government sector was one newspaper article which claims that,

The reasons parents choose private schools for their children vary. For some, the decision to bypass the local government school, especially at secondary level, is contingent on academic results, modern facilities and extensive sports grounds. For others, the lure is the possibility of making connections that could bring social and employment advantages. Whatever the individual reasons, more parents each year are investing in private education. (*The Age*, 24 February 2006, p.14)

In an article written by a former Labor Party political adviser, there is criticism of the inequitable nature of contemporary education systems.

What we have in New South Wales is not a two tier but a three tier system. Education in NSW is no longer public versus private. It is public selective, independent or non-government, and public residual. Public education is not comprehensive because it does not operate on a universal model. Adverse selection is a notable characteristic of public education as well. (Sanchez, 2005, p.1)

As already mentioned, there is evidence that 'adverse selection' has become a feature of the current context of public education. Given that the bulk of the government high school provision consists of comprehensive, coeducational schools, their status must be considered in any assessment of contemporary influences on public education. Concerns about 'the steady evisceration of enrolments in comparison with the non-government sector' are a starting point for much of the current discourse regarding the New South Wales public comprehensive schools (Campbell & Sherington, 2004, p.2). Some of the decline may be attributable to the increase in government funding of new private schools. Other reasons have been suggested, including consumer perceptions of deteriorating standards and facilities in public schools, increased consumer wealth, changes in religious adherence and status-seeking (Partington, 2004).

According to a teachers' union official, the drift away from the public sector has happened 'during a period when the ideology of choice has been promulgated at every turn by governments and the Department' (Gavrielatos, 2004, p.5). The acceptance of a changed education context has also been articulated by a former Director-General of Education.

The fact that public education is available to all poses contemporary challenges which were certainly not in the minds of either the creators or consumers of public education for much of the last century. Today we live in a society in which exclusivity is intertwined with concepts of quality, value, choice and cost. Undoubtedly we are operating in a highly complex environment in which, for increasing numbers of people, education is assuming the status of a commodity – reflecting choice, values, lifestyle and aspirations. (Cappie-Wood, 2004, p.4)

Likewise, recent planning documents acknowledge the current context in which public schools must operate.

The Department exists within a highly competitive education and training environment. Parents have a range of government and non-government school choices for their children. (*DET ICT Strategic Plan 2002–2006*)

The development of a rhetoric of choice means that the public schools face not only the longstanding competition with the private sector, but a new intra-sectoral competition with each other. One principal of an all-boys' school explained that, '[i]t is a completely different environment now in terms of marketing: it is all up to individual schools and principals' (School 2, 2004). The principal of a girls' public high school refers to the success of highly academic institutions.

You're in competition with every school, including other state schools, and there's a whole mass of private schools around here. Did any of the others talk to you about [private school]?

Yes.

That's a running sore. I mean, they make no bones about it: they're setting out to be a selective school. And if you don't get 85 per cent or better there, as a student, you repeat. (School 9, 2004)

A former principal of both single-sex and coeducational schools, whose tenure included the oversight of a girls' school being remade into a coeducational campus, explains that,

In 1956 when I first started teaching there were domestic science high schools and the proper high schools and the move towards co-education I think one sees cutting in about the end of the fifties and into the 1960s so the new schools were built as coed schools and then as the demand increased you had an existing school becoming co-educational and a new school created as co-educational...And my feeling is that there was a general acceptance of comprehensive co-educational high school education as being the norm – and accepted by parents as such until the election of the Liberal Government that had Terry Metherell as the Minister for Education [1988-1990], who had moved very much into this notion of parental choice, of specialization and of additional selective high schools. (Interview, Armstrong, 2002)

There is much to indicate that the appointment of former New South Wales Minister for Education Terry Metherell [1988-1990] marked the end of the dominance of the comprehensive model and the increased focus on consumers as choosers. Metherell himself (1984, p.1) declared that '[t]he great education issues of our time are the improvement of quality and the enlargement of choice throughout our entire education systems, from pre-schools to universities and beyond into the many forms of extended education.' New Liberalism, he argued, would deliver increased accountability by teachers and administrators as well as incentives to improve performance.

According to Metherell (1984, p.1) 'the overwhelming majority of Australians look to their governments to solve real, identifiable, day-to-day problems with the minimum of ideological fuss and the maximum of efficiency and thrift.' Sherington and Campbell (2004) assert that the origins of Australian 'market liberalism' or 'neo liberalism', as it emerged during the last decades of the twentieth century, can be found in the influence of international events, especially the economic contractions of the 1970s. Political appeals to the middle class from the late 1980s were based, as far as schooling was concerned, on 'an agenda that the market place should rule in education' (Sherington & Campbell, 2004, p.69). Allowing market forces to dominate was regarded as the method most likely to deliver improvements in education. As Saltmarsh and Youdell (2004, p.354) summarise,

A neo-liberal environment, now in place in most English-speaking nations, portrays a competitive education context as one that 'enhances quality, promotes efficiency, ensures accountability and is, therefore, in the best interest of all students'.

It is suggested in this study that the theme of economic efficiency has been, and remains, central to the rationale behind decentralisation of New South Wales education bureaucracy, and that from this can be extrapolated some of the reasons for the survival of the single-sex schools. When elected in 1988, the Premier of New South Wales, Nick Greiner, inherited a \$48 billion deficit. The then Department of Education was the largest single public education entity in the western world.

The major changes passed by the Greiner government were based on the recommendations of a management review led by Dr Brian Scott (1990). In his analysis of the role of the then Ministry of Education and Youth Affairs, Scott claims that the priority was 'to deliver the best possible educational outcomes for each educational dollar spent' so that 'educational investments are assessed in terms of their true value as long-term investments, and not simply in terms of alternative expenditure arrangements' (p.ix). According to one participant in the review (Macpherson, 1989, p.1), 'the intervention [economic rationalism] was mandated and warranted, and will have its greatest effect on state school education in the medium and longer term.' In further evidence of the links being made at the time between economic efficiency and the quality of public education Macpherson's (p.5) writings include the statement that 'the context of the Ministerial Review resonated with one central concern; how effectively and efficiently were administrators helping teachers teach and learners learn?' One conclusion drawn by the review was that the key organizational unit in the delivery of a more effective, efficient system was to be the school rather than the bureaucracy.

The principal of one boys' high school in Sydney regards the fiscal implications of either actively supporting or condemning the single-sex public school option act as an impediment to the development of clear policy.

Back them into a corner, and I am sure they will come out talking about finances rather than anything else. It's too expensive to change things now. I haven't heard a philosophy of single-sex high schools that has been expounded by any government over the last fourteen years. (School 4, 2004)

Another principal of one undersubscribed boys' comprehensive school believes that a high level of political pragmatism influences education policy.

I think the politicians and the players that have an impact – the high-level strategic people in the Department – are well aware of the fact that the provision of education is going to include single-sex schools, comprehensive schools, and selective schools, within the spectrum of educational provision. Single-sex schools have a place because they know that you're going to get that diversity of choice to the community out there, the people who are selecting where they're going to send their sons and daughters.

And the bureaucrats would like to say, “Look, we’ve got single-sex schools, and we’ve got comprehensives and we’ve got selectives, and there are other areas like sporting high schools, and specialty schools’ which were a bit of a fad in the early in nineties. That also fits within the spectrum of parental choice, and the bureaucrats and politicians are aware of that. And they’re aware that now, the people like to have choice, or the community likes to have choice, whereas when I was going to school in the sixties, I guess the community at large trusted the bureaucrats, and if it was single-sex ... well they trusted the politicians that that was best for their sons and daughters. (School 2, 2004)

The question of school choice and parents as education consumers – active choosers – is addressed in subsequent chapters in relation to the specific impact on the single-sex comprehensive schools. However, it is also raised here because of this study’s interest in the way in which the public schools generally, and the single-sex alternatives in particular, operate within a highly competitive education marketplace.

5.4.1 Consumer behaviour in the education marketplace

A study conducted by the Centre for Independent Studies concludes that, ‘[i]f comprehensive public schools are truly the best way to educate children, they will have no problem attracting and retaining their students. To say otherwise is to suggest that parents either cannot or will not choose the school that is best for their children’ (Buckingham, 2001, p.6). On the other hand, a lecturer in education in Sydney expresses concern that recent NSW public education policies ‘have surrendered our public schools – and some of our young people – to the consequences of choice in an increasingly market-oriented system of education’ (Hayes, 2005, p.23).

Much of the recent research has linked the schools market to the decision-making of families according to socio-economic status (Gewirtz et al, 1994; Walford 1994; Ball, 1993). According to Carroll and Walford (1996) ‘selection by mortgage’ is typical behaviour of the families that command greater cultural and material resources. This wealth gives children advantages such as the transport required to seek out and attend a more extensive range of schools. Thus, the ‘so-called comprehensive system allow[s] affluent and well-motivated parents to ensure the quality of schooling for their children within the maintained sector’ (Carroll & Walford, 1996, p.394).

An examination of single-sex school enrolments via the DET's website (2005) reveals a strong correlation between demand for these schools and the suburbs characterised by higher median house prices and average annual incomes. Some research indicates that parents are willing to pay substantially more for homes located close to public schools that are believed to perform better academically. For example, Leigh and Davidoff's (2006, p.6) study 'found that house prices reflected the average performance of the local school.' This is true for many of the comprehensive variants as well as those that are academically selective. Even a relatively cursory glance at real estate advertisements reveals the frequent references to access to 'good schools' in more expensive areas and the absence of such references in other regions. According to Meadmore (2001, p.124), the geographic distribution of the single-sex public schools may typify the 'structural disadvantages as the practices associated with these changes privilege urban middle-class parents.' As wealthier parents choose against some schools, so the argument goes, some schools begin to struggle to maintain enrolments and resources and may enter a cycle of decline.

5.4.2 Residualisation

A further consequence of the choosing behaviour mentioned earlier is the creation of 'residual schools'. According to one historical informant, a significant number of public comprehensives are 'like public hospitals; you only go there if you can't afford something better' (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004). Marginson (1997) identifies parents as the key to the public system's enrolment losses. He describes 'a dynamic of *residualisation*' [original italics] that was well underway by the mid-1980s.

The more that affluent, socially powerful and politically and culturally competent middle-class families withdrew from the government system, the harder it was for other families to stay...where it was most pronounced, especially in the major cities, the government schools lost 'a critical core of able and motivated students' and 'influential and articulate parents' who would otherwise have been strong advocates for those schools and systems, and on-going contributors to their improvement and reform. (p.159)

As established in earlier chapters, there has been a tendency for Australian education to be influenced by the trends of other English-speaking nations. Research on the

decline in support for British government schools goes some way to explaining the developments in New South Wales education. For example, a recent report from the Minister for Education in the United Kingdom concludes that 'comprehensives had not been the engine of social mobility and equality that their architects had hoped' (*Times Online* 26 July 2005). A study published by the London School of Economics, titled *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America* (Blanden et al, 2005) focuses on the relationship between family income in the childhood years and educational attainment by students. A key finding is that for young Britons born in the 1970s and 1980s, the period of adoption of the comprehensive education system, there was 'a narrowing of the gap between the staying on rates at 16 between rich and poor children, but a further widening in the inequality of access to higher education' (2005, p.2). The report does not refer to specific school types, but suggests that 'policies to increase intergenerational mobility will need to focus on raising poorer children's attainment through targeted services and access to the best schools' (p.13).

There is also evidence that the ideal of the comprehensive school as an agent of change for egalitarianism and social unity may have lost some appeal in an educational climate characterised by consumer desire for what Salomone (2003) calls a 'special something'. A former principal of several New South Wales single-sex schools considers that,

The bottom line is that this all goes along with the extension of Commonwealth support for non-government schools ... There has been a trend since the late 1970s and early 1980s that if the student did not get into a selective high school, he or she would immediately move to a non-government school ... Many people feel that if you can't have selectivity you are not special. So we now have a situation enabling selection by gender, if not by academic achievement. (Interview, Armstrong, 2003)

According to this perspective, consumer aspirations play a major part in the selection of schools and the effects will inevitably be felt by schools that do not produce high academic achievers, or offer distinction of some other kind. The current context of public schooling thus promotes selectivity across schools within the same system, potentially having a very different outcome from that envisaged by the

recommendations of the Wyndham Report. This is mirrored by the findings of a report conducted on behalf of the New South Wales government, which states that,

The tension between rigour and inclusiveness is the predominant, though not exclusive, challenge of public comprehensive high schools, particularly those serving concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds or schools experiencing increasing residualisation within their localities. (NSW Public Education Council, 2005, p.120)

The Public Education Council's analysis supports the suggestion that the educational norm has shifted from comprehensiveness back to differentiation, and that this has indirectly contributed to the enduring appeal of the single-sex schools. The principal of one government boys' school suggests that the evidence for this lies in the response of education authorities to increasing market pressure.

Where would the bulk of the students come from?

The bulk still comes from the local area. But you have to remember that across the road is [private girls' school], up the road is [Catholic girls' school], further down the road is [private boys' school], up the road here are [Catholic boys' school] and [private boys' school], so we are very much in the private school belt. Which is why, I believe, the government made us a selective school – to provide some competition for the private sector. This goes back to 1992, when the announcement was made, and we became selective, progressively, from 1994, so that by 1999 we were fully selective.

So did anyone provide a rationale for it, something in writing, or are you simply surmising?

It was a political decision. I was informed of the decision ten minutes before my colleagues, the other principals in the area, were informed. But, anecdotally, I have heard that it is to provide that competition and also they wanted to retain this school and [selective girls' school], because their numbers were falling. It was going to be a fight to see who collapsed first – [boys' public high school] or [boys' public high school].

Is that right? When was this?

1992, 1993. Again, because boys' schools were not the flavour of the month, and in many cases, still are not, whereas they were not considering closing [girls' selective high school]. It

has a very strong Old Girls Union. They used to be a selective school in the 50s and thought it was their God-given right to be restored to their former glory.

But it was a political decision.

Made by the Minister at the time.

And there was no consultation?

Oh, they would argue that there was consultation but you know what consultation means. In some areas, 'Yes, we talked to one person.' No, there was consultation of a sort but in fact the concept of a selective school was never raised. At that stage we were looking to go co-educational comprehensive. (School 6, 2005)

According to a former Director-General of Education, the move away from the neighbourhood comprehensive school has been a direct outcome of the recent commitment to choice for consumers.

I think we are now so diverse and we are trying to cater for so many divergent views that almost anything goes. So if there is a demand, I think there is no question. You know, Metherell used the words 'choice' and 'we need choice' but I am not too sure that I understand what that means in terms of what types of choices you are prepared to provide in the government system, merely to meet particular interest groups' demands.

So you would argue that in broadening the choice, you lose the core identity?

Of course you do. I mean, it is interesting that we set up the technology high schools; that was Metherell's concept. If you examine the technology high schools today, tell me the difference between those and the comprehensive high schools. I have grandchildren going to the technology high schools and I ask them, 'What is the difference?' There is none.

Is it just about marketing?

Of course it is. Yes. Marketing has become a very important aspect of government schools. You have seen them trying to sell themselves and compete with each other now. I think that is a sad thing. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

A second informant links the response of education authorities in this regard to influences from other countries, where the decline of public education has also

become apparent. The influence of overseas trends in educational decision-making was explored in earlier chapters in this thesis. According to this former senior bureaucrat,

I think it is likely – because I have looked at places in England and America – that public schools will, for some considerable time, if not always, have a variety of special offerings. Where we've got those sports high schools – you mentioned those, which are listed on the website and so on – I looked at those in a variety of places in America and they have a mathematics high school and a this high school and that. And they try and attract their clientele to the government school systems through special offerings. They're appealing in some ways to the elitist sentiments that people have and want to get in on them. But I think it is likely, for religious, cultural, elitist, market-share and whole range of reasons that we're likely to have in the government system a much more diverse range of schools than just district comprehensive co-education. (Interview, Winder, 2004)

In later sections and chapters it is argued that the single-sex schools have an unofficial specialist role by virtue of their practice of gender segregation. The rise of the ideology of choice, accompanying the marketisation of education as a consumer commodity, has encouraged some single-sex public schools to exploit this feature in overt ways.

5.5 The response of the public system to market pressures

The rise of a market-oriented education context, together with the rapid growth of the non-government school sector, has been well documented and forms the basis for several reports recently commissioned or sanctioned by New South Wales education authorities (for example, NSW Public Education Council, 2005; Vinson, 2001).

According to one historian, '[t]he state schools have been aware of the danger [of increasing consumer demands for choice in education] and have, in different ways, tried to meet it, but without success' (Hirst, 2004, p.13).

For example, Groundwater-Smith's (2001) study of one Sydney metropolitan school district was designed to determine the basis for consumer selection of schools and to assist in developing strategies for marketing the local comprehensive schools. The starting point for the study was an evaluation of a policy climate dominated by 'marketisation of schools and the intensified competition between and within government and non-government sectors' (p.1).

The government's strategy has been 'to 'rescue' public secondary education through the re-introduction of the principle of selection either on the basis of academic or other criteria' (Campbell & Sherington, 2004, p.7). The result, according to a range of historical informants, was to create a market culture, in which many parents felt encouraged – perhaps even obliged – to choose *for* or *against* their local high school. A strong market ideology, in other words, presents options that appeal to parental aspirations for their children. These educational options present the academic, religious, co-curricular and other features of the institutions, potentially to be contrasted with a 'neighbourhood' comprehensive model that claims no curricular or extra-curricular distinction.

Morrow et al's (1998) analysis speculates that the contemporary education context is now so competitive that individual institutions must begin from a premise of differentiation.

Marketing practices have themselves created divisions within the public school communities around the country as individual public schools compete with one another to attract students by promoting particular features of their own

establishments. In some states, the public schools have reverted to a nineties version of the old tripartite schooling divisions by adopting a policy of 'specialist' schools...Thus there are music schools, technology schools, schools for students of high intellectual potential, single sex schools, International Baccalaureate schools, industry-based schools and so on. (Morrow et al, 1998, p.14)

The single-sex schools may be demonstrating that 'tradition and enterprise combined as a vision can coalesce compatibly' (Meadmore & Meadmore, 2004, p.377). That is, now that all schools are understood to adhere to curriculum requirements that apply equally to both sexes, the single-sex institutions (particularly the more academically successful ones) are able to make the case for gender segregation on other grounds. The brochure from one comprehensive girls' school claims expertise in the teaching of females.

We specialise in the education of girls and young women.

What we teach, how we teach it and the learning environment we create is (sic) guided by what is best for girls and their development.

Students face many challenges in high school as they strive for personal bests in learning and life beyond school. At a girls' school we can focus all our attention on the particular challenges for girls, and address them directly.

The single-sex schools' proactive approach to positioning themselves in a highly competitive consumer society is evidence of the pressure under which many public education systems now operate. As will be discussed in later chapters, the findings of this study refer specifically to school-based advertising that highlights the single-sex versus coeducation debate, describes the alleged benefits of single-sex education for one or the other sex, and claims particular expertise in this regard. The oldest such literature collected for this study came from a comprehensive boys' school whose principal pointed directly at the school's most distinctive feature.

At some time in your life as a parent you will be faced with choosing a high school for your children or having to make a new choice based on changing circumstances. Should it be single-sex or co-educational, local or non-local?

In the 70s and 80s these decisions were made easier with the zoning of schools and the fact that the only new schools were

co-educational. Co-education became the preferred option in a time of limited choices.

The same significant swing did not happen in the private system. The great majority of these schools are still single-sex schools.

In recent years with greater parental freedom of choice, we have witnessed more parents seriously examining and choosing the benefits of single-sex education.

If you are a Year 6 parent, or looking for a new school, you could be disadvantaging your child by not considering this option.

The final paragraph in this statement to prospective parents presents a view that is demonstrably at odds with the neighbourhood comprehensive school philosophy of public education. In this regard, marketing strategies such as these are carried out in apparent philosophical isolation from both the central administration and other single-sex institutions. In the absence of overarching statements of ideological support from the department, it is suggested that the practice of single-sex education has only marginal official standing within the public sector. In a competitive education market, this must be contrasted with the pro-active marketing strategies of the single-sex private schools, whose 'vision', as Meadmore and Meadmore (2004) call it, promotes the differences between the two school types.

In his review of New South Wales public education, Vinson (2001, p.13) argues for 'a balance between a system focused on excellence and inclusion...one that accepts some differentiation within the education system, but strongly supports comprehensiveness.' The framework for this argument included discussion of the implications of dezoning, academic selectivity, specialisation, stand-alone senior colleges and multi-campus colleges. The first three had been introduced by a Liberal government in the late 1980s as part of attempts to reform a huge, centralized system (Macpherson, 1989). The last two were introduced under a Labor Government in the 1990s. Underscoring this study's theme of the group left out, Vinson's (2001) references to systemic differentiation did not include the single-sex option.

It is arguable that academic selectivity and curriculum specialisation can be accommodated philosophically within a system of education that promotes diverse

models, but that single-sex schooling is more difficult to rationalise alongside the commitment to comprehensiveness and inclusion. According to the principal of one boys' high school, whose professional experience spans nearly four decades,

I don't know of any single-sex high schools that have been created because we want to deal with boys' education or we want to promote girls' education strategies. Whereas Centres of Excellence were something that came up initially – that is what they were called by Metherell, Centres of Excellence – rather than putting the nomenclature on the front of a high school, like [co-educational] Creative Arts High School or [co-educational] Sports High School or whatever. They were political decisions to do that, and if you are going to make that sort of political decision, you are going to have to justify it and if you are going to justify it you are going to have to support it with money and staffing and special concessions.

Where are the special concessions in the single-sex high schools? You won't find any of the forty-six that are in existence in New South Wales having any special concessions because they are single-sex high schools. It wasn't a recent political decision, so you are not going to find any particular support given to them.

And philosophically, do you think it might be a little uncomfortable for some, particularly perhaps a Labor Government, who are strong supporters of comprehensive, co-educational schools?

You just don't hear about it; we don't hear anything about single-sex high schools. Nothing is said, one way or another, by Labor or Liberal. I've got to say that over the years since 1988, since the election of the Greiner Government, we have had governments of both persuasions in NSW who have proceeded down the same path, so criticisms of the way education works, and criticisms of the decisions that are made from a political point of view, ring a little bit hollow, given that both governments go the same way and neither government has made any position clear on single-sex schools. Back them into a corner and I am sure they will come out talking about finances rather than anything else. It's too expensive to change things now. I haven't heard a philosophy of single-sex high schools that has been expounded by any government over the past fourteen years. (School 1, 2004)

In this principal's summation, retention of the single-sex option does not represent a purposeful response to an increasingly competitive education marketplace. Rather, it is evidence that the diffident official support for these schools found in the Wyndham

Report has continued under subsequent governments. In the absence of overt political, bureaucratic and other support for the single-sex public alternative, it becomes particularly important to investigate how the schools themselves have responded to the contemporary context.

5.5.1 Devolving responsibility to schools

As argued in earlier sections, there is evidence that some changes to the operations of public schools reflect state government attempts to achieve economic rationalist goals. Recent studies describe the effects on public schools as the rhetoric of parental choice and market forces in education has encouraged competition between the government and non-government systems (Meadmore, 2001; Marginson, 1997; Kenway, 1993; Ball, 1990).

As will be seen in later chapters, there is evidence that the contemporary education context permits – arguably even requires – individual schools to be innovative in response to the rise of a competitive education market. This study has previously drawn on Hughes (1999; 2001) to argue that comprehensive principles were inevitably undermined by the retention of schools that selected by sex and/or academic ability. The incomplete implementation of the comprehensive model is further reflected in the recent changes to the way in which schools operate as part of the wider public system. Education bureaucracies increased substantially in size during the 1950s and 1960s to reflect growing student numbers and increased access to schooling, as well as the belief in a centralised, hierarchical public education structure. In recent years there have been attempts across Australia to reduce their size and complexity, while still retaining ministerial and bureaucratic control of curriculum and some other functions (Barcan, 1995). Such devolutionary reforms reflect a restructuring in all Australian states and territories that places administrative responsibilities in the hands of principals and school councils.

According to Meadmore (2001, p.118), '[t]his new form of public sector management involves the application of discourses of corporate managerialism in the pursuit of efficiency, and economic rationalism in prioritizing outcomes.' Although such shifts are an indication of a more regulatory approach to some aspects of public school

systems, there are further implications for a highly differentiated system such as that in New South Wales. The net effect is to require public school principals to implement what Ball (1994) describes as the 'hidden curriculum' of marketisation. As a consequence, 'the old values of community, cooperation, individual need and individual worth which underlay systems of public education can be replaced by values that celebrate individualism, competition, performativity and differentiation' (Meadmore, 2001, p.119). There is evidence that such changes in the roles and expectations of schools and their principals have given some single-sex institutions greater confidence about marketing gender segregation as a positive aspect of their operations.

The various interpretations of the effects of devolution all point to a policy discourse reflecting reactivity rather than pro-activity. With specific reference to New South Wales, Bagnall (1999, p.22) claims that education authorities are encouraging principals to 'build a team of people with values and beliefs consistent with the ethos of their particular school communities.' Some evidence for this is reflected in the ethnic clustering peculiar to some of the single-sex schools, both selective and comprehensive, which is discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. This approach is necessary 'in order for public schools to compete successfully with non-government schools, which have the flexibility to adjust their profile in order to capture a market niche' (Bagnall, cited in Meadmore 2001, p.119).

There are some who claim that this restructuring enables the hegemony of an 'enterprise culture' that is simplistic and symbolic rather than offering substantive solutions for schooling (Smyth, 1999). This culture bases educational reform on the notion that schools must play a greater part in ensuring that all young people are able to contribute to national economic growth, and that this can be achieved by stressing 'innovation, partnerships with industry, networking, vocational education programs, and acquiring enterprising skills, knowledge and behaviours' (p.436).

In Connell's (2002) opinion, this reflects a 'metapolicy', or the overarching framework for all other policies. The impact on education is seen in 'the continuing attempts to turn public schools into enterprises and principals into entrepreneurs' (p.323). The shifting of hitherto centralised authority to school level is not without

complications, according to a former New South Wales Director-General of Education (Sharpe, cited in Winder, 1991). Sharpe (1991, p.11) claims that,

An initial reaction in each nation or state has been that these initiatives have been capricious or arbitrary, being an ill-considered attempt to implement an ideological stance as far as education is concerned or an inappropriate allocation of economic values to a field of human service.

A key contention of this study is that the philosophical tension between the official support for the comprehensive model and the increasing diversification of the public system offers the single-sex schools the potential to claim a new place in the education marketplace. The effect of this tension on the role of the principals is discussed in relation to the ways in which schools present themselves to consumers and the financial and other support they receive to do this. The devolution of authority to schools and increased demands for accountability in terms of student achievement have both placed pressures on school leaders and teachers that create new challenges to explain and justify diversity. In this regard, the single-sex schools are in the same position as their coeducational counterparts. However, as will be seen, the data collected for this study suggest that their unique enrolment practices may enhance their capacity to respond to such pressures.

As suggested in previous chapters, there appears to be some confusion about the exact basis for the delivery of public education. The forty-six single-sex schools in New South Wales may be regarded as forming part of a system of public education where a centralised decision-making structure has devolved, to a greater or lesser extent, to a local, school-based management system. Today's public schools operate in an environment in which the dominant discourse is economic, and 'the pressure on school principals, teachers and their schools councils to balance the budget makes it difficult for them to be fair arbiters of social justice and equity issues' (Meadmore, 2001, p.121).

According to an article published on the NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens Associations website, former Minister for Education Terry Metherell 'engineered' school-based management as a result of consultations with advisers to former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. The Federation's report claims that '[d]evolution

placed all sorts of new and unwelcome responsibilities on schools and yet fails to deliver the voice that parents have always called for' (*Choice, Voice and Interactive Schools*, 2002, p.5).

A solution is offered by a former senior bureaucrat who maintains that, '[t]he people who know best about that are principals and so it is my belief that whether they are principals of comprehensive coeds or single-sex schools or selective schools, they need to be given a bit of room to move to shape themselves and really adapt to the circumstances' (Interview, Laughlin, 2005).

During the course of this study, the NSW Department of Education and Training initiated a program to support public schools in positioning themselves in the current highly competitive education market. In an acknowledgement that new strategies were required to influence parental and student choices, a CD-Rom was sent to all schools with advice on ways to communicate with the local community, how to produce school newsletters and other publications and suggestions for ways to enhance the standing of schools in the public domain. In addition, departmental officers were appointed to each region to provide marketing advice to schools.

There is, therefore, some evidence that public education is engaged in a philosophical and practical struggle between a belief system grounded in the educational reforms of the 1960s and the stated intention of meeting the demands and expectations of consumers in a choice-oriented marketplace. Given that diversity and differentiation in schooling are presented at system level as positive features in themselves, schools that fail to distinguish themselves in some way are perceived to be less progressive than those that can claim a specialisation. The difficulty for schools lies in the public system's apparent reluctance to engage in an overt intellectual, philosophical or pedagogical reconciliation of differentiation – particularly as it can be seen in the existence of a large number of single-sex schools – with the continued commitment to comprehensive education. This study suggests that a policy discourse promoting differentiation and diversity is likely to be more credible if it sets out in detail all of the arguments for retaining educational options that epitomise those goals.

5.6 The single-sex schools within contemporary education discourse

There is a claim that education consumers are confronted by a 'more multi-layered system in New South Wales' than elsewhere in Australia, with one government report describing it as 'a move away from values associated with social cohesion' (Vinson, 2001, p.12). The ideological commitment to comprehensive schooling means that 'a balance between a system focused on excellence and inclusions is needed, one that accepts some differentiation within the education system' (p.13) while simultaneously adhering to longstanding principles of equity and equality of opportunity. Notably, the NSW Department of Education and Training's *Corporate Plan (2006-2008)* stresses the need to be Learner Centred, Innovative, Collaborative, Responsive, Equitable and Accountable, and claims that its primary goal is '[t]o improve the social and economic wellbeing of the people of New South Wales through a responsive and sustainable education and training system' (NSW DET, 2005b, p.2). The plan is presented as a framework for schools to design their operations to meet local needs, but there is no detailed philosophical or practical reconciliation of a highly differentiated structure with the ideals of comprehensive education.

The principals interviewed for this study were asked about the opportunities provided for them to discuss issues directly related to their work in boys' and girls' schools. Three principals testified that there were few or no such opportunities.

No. there's not, really. We have [boys' high school, [boys' high school], [boys' high school]...just in this one small geographic area. So when we have our normal meetings [secondary principals], we talk to each other, obviously, but since I've been here there hasn't been a lot of gender-based discussion. (School 5, 2004)

I think [principal] of [girls' school] sent a fax out at the end of last year saying something about an annual girls' principals' dinner ... I am certainly unaware of a girls' schools' principals' union, or regular meeting. (School 3, 2004)

No, not really. I talk with the principal over at [co-ed school]. It's more the interpersonal relationships that you build up in the principals' network than the type of school. I don't go looking for another girls' school principal. (School 8, 2004)

As was explained in Chapter 3, the origins of the contemporary single-sex provision lie in the early colonial administrations' commitment to segregation of the sexes during school. It is thus something of an historic coincidence that these principals' peers are more typically part of the non-government systems and that opportunities for such specific professional interaction seem more likely to come from those sources.

There's none [professional network for single-sex schools] at all. It's not like selective schools, for example, that have their own conference. No, we don't have any single-sex conferences or boys' education conferences that we would attend. I've attended several boys' education conference and found I'm the only principal there from a government boys' high school. (School 1, 2004)

I've had invitations to attend the meetings of an association for the heads of girls' schools in Sydney, but I've never taken it up, because it's for private schools, [girls' private school] and places like that. I'd probably feel a little out of character there. (School 9, 2004)

In earlier chapters it has been explained that the single-sex public high schools of New South Wales have received little attention from researchers and in official documents. Their virtual absence from the discourse means there is little government-sanctioned material for principals to use in promoting their schools on the basis of their single-sex status. It also becomes more difficult for stakeholders to participate in the debate or to make informed decisions about such schools. A lack of access to information means that attitudes are likely to be formed on the basis of perception, an issue that is developed later in this chapter. The implications are equally significant for those within the system and those outside it. Titus (2004, p.147) suggests that '[t]he availability of a discourse can either enhance or constrain social practice, while a dominant one can silence alternatives.' For some, the presentation of single-sex education as outmoded and inappropriate to modern life has been so dominant an aspect of the discourse that the debate has been restricted along ideological lines (Gill, 1988). One principal of an oversubscribed, comprehensive girls' school describes the effects of such ignorance of the contemporary provision of single-sex schools.

So there's obviously some debate ...

I actually think it's stronger than that. I think it's polarization. I have colleagues who perhaps see this particular school as being a wannabe private school.

Is that right?

Oh yes, oh yes. '[name] Ladies' College' – no, we're not. We're [name] Girls' High School.

Why would they say that?

Because it's an easy way to discount having to actually engage with us, or to engage with who we are and the way we go about doing things.

These are your colleagues at other similar schools?

Yes, at other schools. Co-educational comprehensive schools, not selective ones. But they see us as being perhaps a little old-fashioned. Some people would view us as being a bit jolly-hockey sticks. You know, girls' fun in the dorm kind of stuff. Yes, they're the negative perceptions. (School 3, 2004)

An incomplete telling of the story of the single-sex schools may derive partly from the antagonism between the supporters of single-sex schools and their detractors, who see the continued existence of these institutions as the epitome of past inequities. Such ideological disagreement, it is suggested, associates coeducation with progressive attitudes and 'limits representations of the field of gender equity to neat accounts masking its messiness, its power plays and its failures' (Hayes, 1998, p.2).

Yates (1996) maintains, however, that the nature of the debate has changed. The focus on girls as the disadvantaged subject has shifted to new concerns about boys, as well as what constitutes inequality in schools. Stakeholders are reminded that 'not only have our constructions of girls changed, girls themselves are not the same student body, and they do not have the same identities, understandings and aspirations today, as they did a century ago, half a century ago, or even twenty-five years ago' (Yates, 1996, p.4). If the students have changed, surely it follows that the schools will have changed as well, becoming what were referred to in an earlier chapter as 'second-generation schools' (Salomone, 2003). A key argument of this study is that a more inclusive discourse would make room for new ways of looking at the schools as a valid educational option in a demonstrably diverse provision.

According to one former educator and union leader, any renegotiation of the ideological role and practical place of single-sex education is unlikely.

The schools just don't have a profile, if you could put it that way?

Well, if you were running a system as big as that, this, with the number of high schools that you've got the last thing you'd want is pressure from the community to re-split all your co-eds.

I mean if you think about it in a political sense, you really don't want to go down that path. And when you're building new schools in new areas you don't want to be going down that path either. Once you go down the path of making the provision available or making it popular, or making it known, then you're into big bikkies [costs] territory.

And it also cuts back your opportunity of amalgamating schools as they've had to over recent years with Dover Heights Boys and Girls and Jannali Boys and Girls and of course earlier with Narrabeen Boys and Girls and so on. That's a good economic decision for the system so it makes good economic sense for them not to push this notion of separation too far.

Despite the focus on diversity in public education?

Yes, yes. And if you were going to do a run of boys' education programs or an education program that singles out particular kinds of boys or particular kinds of girls, we'd rather you run it in the local school and then it becomes available to more people.

And if you're going to have any kind of diversity, then you either run it on the single site or you'd make it available in a collegiate; that's the purpose of these new collegiates. It opens up the possibility of moving kids around to give them a bit better choice. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2003)

Meadmore and Meadmore (2004) say that all schools must now prove 'performativity', i.e. a culture that requires all participants to demonstrate productivity and commitment to making aspects of the school into market assets. The enduring appeal of the New South Wales boys' and girls' public schools indicates that these schools represent an element of value-addedness for many consumers. As the data collected from schools shows in later chapters, some single-sex public schools are building new and overt identities that distinguish them from their coeducational peers.

In publicly stating this mission, the schools remain officially within the traditional ideological fold but offer evidence of a distancing from the post-Wyndham context and indicate the intention of claiming space in contemporary educational discourse.

5.6.1 Equity discourse and the single-sex schools

The presence of the single-sex factor creates an underlying tension between twenty-first century educational goals and what Phillips (2003, p.12) refers to as ‘the complex effects of commodification and consumerization, autonomy and performativity and centralization and prescription.’ With specific reference to public schools, he says, ‘equality in educational achievement has given way to equality of access to provision with the development of equity’ (Muschamp et al, cited in Phillips, 2003, p.12). It is important to consider how educational change may be connected to socio-political change. Reid (2002) sets his analysis of the relationship between democracy and public schooling in Australia against the pressures of a globalizing world and argues that much of the traditional social cooperation that characterised past approaches to nation-building is likely to lose its significance to the hegemony of free market philosophy.

Current neo-liberal policy draws upon and sustains a contemporary ‘realist’ conception of democracy that assumes that democracy flourishes best in an individualistic society with a competitive market economy, minimal state intervention, a politically passive citizenry and an active elite political leadership (Carr & Hartnett 1996). This view of democracy produces education policy that constructs education as a positional good and emphasizes individual freedom of choice at the expense of equity and broader collective social purposes of education. (Reid, 2002, p.572)

Whereas once it would have been inconceivable to present single-sex education as a ‘positional good’, the neo-liberal philosophy can accommodate such schools on the basis that it is a response to the democratic expression of choice. In their practice of gender segregation, the single-sex schools manifest an unavoidable degree of exclusivity and selectivity and may be seen by some as presenting an inexplicable and insoluble challenge to equity in education. However, this study has found no evidence of such a challenge in terms of the New South Wales single-sex provision. On the contrary, the enduring appeal of the single-sex public schools indicates strong

consumer support for this option. Further, despite the increased emphasis on boys' achievement at school, as well as concerns expressed about non-English speaking immigrants and indigenous Australians, the disadvantage discourse does not suggest eliminating single-sex schools on the grounds of discrimination or gender-based inequality. Instead, as mentioned previously, the argument for school closure or amalgamation has been predominantly economic.

The longstanding commitment to gender equity in education may also be a powerful disincentive to any increased focus on the single-sex public education option. It is noteworthy that the single-sex schools were ignored in past DET gender equity documents (*Towards a Non-Sexist Education* (1979), *Evaluation of Educational Outcomes for Girls in New South Wales Government Secondary Schools* (1984), *Girls' Education Strategy* (1989), *Girls and Boys at School: Gender Equity Strategy 1996-2001*) in spite of the fact that policy reports all emphasised the need for more research into the relative effects of school gender context on student outcomes.

While the gender discourse of the 1970s and 1980s connected education policy with feminism and challenged the traditional masculine domination over curriculum and school governance, each state 'responded to the national gender equity policy from its own cultural and political context' (Marshall, 2000, p.130). The *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (1987), for example, was released at a time when New South Wales had already experienced over two decades of commitment to the comprehensive, coeducational model. While the proportion of single-sex schools remained significant in comparison to the other states, this differentiation has not been acknowledged in the central office's development of materials for use in schools.

In 2002 the Gender Equity Unit produced a 'parent training and development package' called *Exploring Gender: For everyone with a girl or boy at a NSW Government School*. The package was promoted on the DET's website as part of a campaign to introduce parents 'to the meaning of gender and why it is an important educational issue for all students' (DET Gender Education, 2002).

Public Schools in NSW aim to ensure boys and girls have equal access to learning at school despite any perceived differences or stereotypes about the strengths or weaknesses between genders.

In the absence of any detailed references to the role of single-sex schools, this study's informants report that it has sometimes been challenging to find ways of making these documents meaningful in single-sex settings. The principal of one boys' school refers to his own studies of single-sex and coeducational schools. He was interested in the variables that influence academic achievement, such as parental background, study skills and the impact of peer groups and found no conclusive evidence to indicate that gender in and of itself plays a significant part in students' results.

There is a group of consultants and so on that have produced papers that do coordinate gender literature, obviously for both boys and girls. And they've produced material over recent times... And when I started reading about this material in the mid-nineties, I started off thinking, wow, there's an argument here that maybe boys are disadvantaged at this stage and maybe a little under-resourced, compared to the girls. Because the HSC results were, on the surface, showing that. But I guess, in a nutshell, my own research showed that there is a large percentage of boys who either weren't working hard enough or didn't know how to work effectively. (School 5, 2005)

Such shifts in thinking about gender are necessarily related to issues of equality, and are inevitably linked with the capacity of public institutions to introduce change and modify their practices where required. Since the 1970s, the best example of such change has been the move away from single-sex schools, particularly those that differentiate by class as well as gender, such as the former vocational schools. The determination to eliminate anything resembling segregation by gender resulted in an educational environment characterised by sameness, or 'a sort of androgyny' (Yates, 1996, p.5). Some principals contend that the single-sex option continues to be diminished even in a post-feminist, post-modernist era.

I have no sense of any policy relating to the single-sex schools. I am worried about a lot of the co-ed schools and new questions being asked about boys' education. It is lip service. It is too confronting to focus on single-sex schools because the DET wants to be seen to treat all schools the same way. (School 2, 2004)

Martinez (2003, p.7) claims that '[t]he dichotomisation of gender issues – they can be about either boys or girls but not both – inclines all strategies towards partial goals, depleted of their social justice objectives.' However, the continued existence of forty-six single-sex public schools would indicate that many consumers do not question that it is possible to deliver a socially just and equitable education in a gender-segregated environment. If the evidence for this is not given in official publications, students and their parents must be making their choices on the basis of perceptions, with at least some reference to, or comparison with, the 'neighbourhood' comprehensive schools. The lack of public dissemination of the work being done in such institutions may be a parallel to the untold story of 'wonderfully innovative, resistant and contrary practice by teachers in schools, who every day make their own meaning out of policy and theory in the complex domain of human relations' (Martinez, 2003, p.7).

Much of the debate has presented coeducation as the only path to gender equity, despite considerable evidence that many amalgamations and closures of single-gender schools have been driven by financial necessity, rather than research-based decision-making (Gill, 1992). Such institutional changes must be seen as distinct from the New South Wales system's construction of new coeducational high schools in the post-Wyndham era, which was based on an ideological consensus about the value of coeducation. High levels of confusion and disagreement about a differentiated provision should therefore not be discounted as contributing to an educational climate in which consumers frequently associate the single-sex option with academic selectivity and private (elitist) education (Willis & Kenway, 1986).

Other factors can therefore be considered when seeking to explain the enduring practice of segregation by gender and the concomitant absence of references to the schools in official documents. There is a view that the remaining single-sex high schools reflect a culture of differentiation that has produced many of the socially and politically powerful. Harris (1986, p.118) concludes that the single-sex nature of the vast majority of the selective high schools in Australia makes it almost inevitable that students enrolled in such schools 'are often found to have parents of higher occupational, educational and income levels, as well as having higher educational aspirations themselves.' For some historical informants, the presence of 'Old Boys'

from such schools in positions of influence has helped to reinforce the existence of these schools as a longstanding, and positive, feature of New South Wales education. One former Deputy Director-General of Education recalls that,

You also had, amongst senior members of government, and the senior members of the Department, people whose whole background and their own upbringing was in separate schools.

For example, when I went into Head Office - this will only give you a little perspective - in 1971 as professional assistant to the Director-General, the senior staff used to meet for morning tea, and have it together with the Director-General. And I was the only one there who had gone to a comprehensive mixed school. Everyone else talked about Fort Street, or Sydney Boys', or Canterbury - just like John Howard - they had a background in those schools. And they were valued, and it wasn't ever considered that anything would be done about them. (Interview, Buchan, 2004)

Interviews with former and serving principals indicate that the single-sex provision itself is separated into tiers associated not only with academic selectivity but also with class, socio-economic status, cultural background and other demographic characteristics. If, as some researchers posit, the 21st century marks the end of equity programs, and there is no longer a focus on the 'compensatory' aim of legislation in education, then the low profile of the majority of the contemporary single-sex schools may serve to deflect attention from the 'mechanisms of exclusion and advantage [that] still operate in Australian schools' (Connell, 2002, p.325).

5.7 Discussion

In previous chapters a critical era was identified to explain the decline of the single-sex public option and its replacement by the ideologically progressive comprehensive, coeducational model. This study argues that the enduring appeal of the single-sex schools can be linked to the Wyndham Report, which acknowledged that there was inadequate research-based evidence or community support to make the case for eliminating all of the single-sex schools. Further, as was discussed earlier, the Report enshrined the notion of providing differentiated school types under particular circumstances. For example, the geographic location and population distribution sometimes made it impossible for a longstanding, successful school to be designated as a 'neighbourhood' model, but the cost of restructuring the school was

prohibitive. In other cases, the schools endured because, according to the then New South Wales Minister for Education, they had ‘a long-established history which no sensible person would wish to ignore’ (Ernest Wetherell, cited in Hughes, 1999, p.166). The single-sex schools that endured in light of these concessions, subsequently benefited from new notions of economic efficiency and market forces that took hold from the late 1980s.

The comprehensive, coeducational school model continues to dominate the government school provision, retains widespread ideological support and remains ‘largely faithful to the precepts of the Wyndham Report (Hughes, 2001, p.1). However, the current context of public education is becoming more reminiscent of pre-Wyndham diversity than the cohesion to which the Report aspired. Consequently, it is more pertinent to view the entire New South Wales public system as comprehensive, rather than looking for comprehensive, coeducational institutions in every neighbourhood. Instead of being able to follow diverse programs within the comprehensive school model, students are now being encouraged to choose among an increasingly diverse range of school types. In an education context that is market-driven, this study argues that single-sex schools are a manifestation of diversity and their enduring appeal rests to some degree on the system’s imperative of responding to consumer demands for choice.

At the same time, however, this study contends that the schools’ selectivity by sex remains highly ideologically confronting, because there is no official rationale for their presence in a system that has long been dedicated to equality of opportunity. This ideological impasse is addressed in more detail in later chapters.

Additionally, the current context is characterised by a competitive education market in which all schools are required to find innovative ways of appealing to consumers. This chapter has sought to locate the single-sex schools within that broad context and suggests that the single-sex comprehensive variants are now in a more advantageous position because of their most overt distinguishing feature – gender selectivity.

In the following chapters, three sub-groups of single-sex schools are considered in terms of their appeal to consumers in a competitive market. The particular strategies

they employ and the communities they target and represent are key features of this investigation of the single-sex option.

6 The single-sex comprehensive schools

Market choice is synonymous with competition. Competition between schools has been proved in practice not to strengthen or broaden educational provision but rather to create ghettos of advantage and disadvantage to the detriment of outcomes. (NSW Federation of Parents' and Citizens' Associations, 2002, p.6)

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the broad context in which forty-six single-sex high schools currently operate as part of the New South Wales government education system. It was argued that neo-liberal, market-oriented influences now affect education to the extent that in New South Wales the 1960s vision of a standardised comprehensive school model is ceding to one in which the public system itself is presented as comprehensive. In New South Wales, as in other public education systems in English-speaking nations, contemporary trends make it 'undeniable that the one-size-fits-all neighbourhood school is slowly yielding to a new consumer-oriented model' (Salomone, 2003, p.5).

This chapter reiterates the philosophical and pedagogical pre-eminence of comprehensive coeducation as the preferred medium for the delivery of mass secondary schooling, particularly since the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme in the 1960s. So dominant was official support for the 'neighbourhood comprehensive' school that it conceded little space in the educational discourse of the 1970s and 1980s for any research focus on the single-sex alternatives. One principal of a girls' comprehensive school reflects on the absence of any systemic differentiation:

So your support is the same as it would be for any other principal in any other school.

Absolutely.

And the Department would look at you simply as another comprehensive high school?

I would think so, yes. Yes. I've never noticed any special recognition that it's single-sex. (School 9, 2004)

At School 5 the principal also refers to the low profile of the single-sex option.

I have been in the system since 1973 and have broad experience in the region and I just don't see it as an up-there issue, although that is not really the right word...but even in conversation...I am thinking of the schools. Out of fifty schools in our own region, there are only four single-sex and five selectives. Most likely you'd have interesting conversations about selectives or even the senior high schools and collegiates, which are more of a talking point these days. No, in all of those years what interesting conversations have I had about single-sex schools? Minimal. (School 5, 2005)

This chapter sets the enduring appeal of the single-sex comprehensive variant against the backdrop of an educational philosophy that holds that equality of opportunity and social cohesion are best delivered by way of schools that 'are open to all, regardless of background, ability or capacity to pay' (NSW Public Education Council, 2005, p.114). This premise, by implication, does not readily accommodate schools that exclude students, whether on the basis of gender or for any other reason. The significance of the single-sex, comprehensive alternative lies in the fact that these schools constitute nearly three-quarters of all gender-segregated public secondary institutions, but are manifestly not 'open to all'.

Drawing further on Salomone's (2003) investigation of this option in the United States, this study suggests that the New South Wales group constitutes a second generation of single-sex schools, unique in their delivery of a comprehensive curriculum in a gender-segregated environment. Salomone (2003, p.8) considers that '[t]here is something else happening in these schools that goes to the heart of their single-sex mission – a special something that their supporters maintain is impossible to replicate in a co-educational setting.' In the Australian context, says Gill (1992, p.4), researchers have tended to emphasise the *experience* of students in single-sex schools, perhaps because they have an 'almost intuitive awareness that the subtleties of the process involved do not lend themselves to quantifiable measures.' Given the low volume of studies of single-sex public schools, especially in the Australian context (see Chapter 3), I contend that this 'special something' – if it exists – has either not yet been successfully described or is simply unidentifiable. In this and successive chapters, however, it is argued that the 'special something' is portrayed most strongly in the marketing strategies employed by some single-sex schools in an effort to distinguish themselves in a competitive education market.

This chapter discusses the philosophical and practical challenges being encountered by the comprehensive schools generally and their single-sex counterparts in particular. It examines school principals' assertions that from the perspective of many consumers the contemporary education market consists of a hierarchy of schools in which the comprehensive coeducational model sits at the bottom.

For the purposes of this study, the subset of single-sex comprehensive schools is taken to include all New South Wales public high schools that offer a standard curriculum and are not academically selective. It includes those comprehensive schools that carry some specialist nomenclature, meaning that they may give preference to students with advanced musical, athletic or other skills but do not select on the basis of academic ability.¹ Because of their numbers and historic role, an examination of this subset is central to understanding the enduring appeal of the single-sex government schools.

This chapter marks the start of the investigation of multiple local school sites, with the intention of identifying the 'special something' that may explain the enduring appeal of the New South Wales single-sex variants. As stipulated in an earlier section on methodology, this analysis is based on qualitative data collected from schools and principals as well as other written and oral sources, with the purpose of investigating the basis on which consumers choose *for* them and thus *against* other schooling options.

¹ New South Wales currently has 31 specialist public high schools. They include 13 technology high schools (three single-sex), seven sports high schools, five languages high schools (one single-sex) and six high schools that claim a particular emphasis on the creative and performing arts.

6.2 A sample of single-sex comprehensive schools

Having no recourse to precedent studies of the entire New South Wales single-sex public school provision, and on the basis that – somewhat ironically – the comprehensive sub-group is too large for such an undertaking in this forum, this study has relied on data from a representative sample of schools. The sample of seven schools, representing just over 20 per cent of all single-sex comprehensive variants, comprises four boys’ and three girls’ schools. Like their coeducational counterparts, these sample schools reflect a wide range of socio-cultural and socio-economic demographics and are located in different parts of Sydney. Again, it must be noted that the single-sex provision as a whole is geographically restricted to the greater Sydney region, with the exception of a boys’ agricultural school located in northern New South Wales. A profile of the seven schools is provided in Table 6.1. This is based on data collected from the NSW Department of Education and Training and from the schools themselves. The descriptors relating to size and socio-economic status are those that were agreed with principals. Due to their distinctive demographic features, two of these comprehensive schools are the subject of further investigation in Chapter 7.

Table 6.1 – Seven school profiles

School	Students	Location	Size	Socio-economic status
1	boys	north	below capacity	working middle
2	boys	east	below capacity	middle
3	girls	north	above capacity	middle affluent
4	boys	west	above capacity	low middle
5	girls	west	above capacity	low middle
7	boys	south	below capacity	low
9	girls	south	below capacity	low

Two of the schools originate from the 1960s era of the Twin School plan, although their principals say they the relationship is not as close as twinship might imply, nor are they co-located. Another school has a twin of the same name, which has not been included in the study, and all but one of the other schools have partner schools catering for the opposite sex, although none identify this relationship as very strong.

6.3 Enrolment trends in all-boys' and all-girls' public schools

In view of the fact that the total number of boys' comprehensive schools (17) is almost equal to that of the girls' comprehensive (20) schools, it is interesting to consider their relative popularity. Consistent levels of enrolment in single-sex comprehensive schools are an indication that many consumers have chosen *for* this option and *against* other schools, including the coeducational, comprehensive model, which, as pointed out in an earlier sections, is available to all in the New South Wales system. If operation at or above enrolment capacity is regarded as evidence of a school's success, then a significant number of the single-sex comprehensives must be regarded as successful. Table 6.2 offers evidence of significant differences in enrolments between boys' and girls' comprehensive schools in New South Wales. It is important to note that while many schools built since the introduction of the comprehensive school model were designed for a thousand students, some earlier schools had smaller sites. It is difficult to assess capacity because of the tendency for oversubscribed schools to add demountable classrooms to their stock. Hence it is necessary to rely on a combination of principals' advice and official statistics.

Table 6.2 – Enrolments in boys' and girls' comprehensive schools

School type	At/above capacity	Below capacity
Boys	3	14
Girls	17	3

On the basis of enrolments, most boys' comprehensive schools could be considered to be struggling to maintain their appeal. Within the group of single-sex comprehensive schools, the advantage lies with the girls' schools.² Figure 6.1 provides a more detailed breakdown of enrolment trends in all-boys' and all-girls' campuses.

² Principals at all of the academically selective single-sex schools, a subset addressed in Chapter 8, reported their enrolments as at or above capacity. Eight of the nine schools are partners. In the case of all but one of these pairs, the girls' schools reported slightly higher enrolments than their male equivalents.

See print copy for figure 6.1

According to the principal of one single-sex comprehensive boys' school, this trend has not gone unnoticed by school leaders.

I don't know what it is about girls' schools. Where you have a girls' school and a boys' school in the same suburb, you're going to, or you're most likely to, attract more girls into the girls' school than you are boys into the boys' school. So at [girls' comprehensive], for example, they've got 900; we've got 600. At [boys' comprehensive (twin)] they've got roughly 250 to 300 more than they've got in the girls' school. That's a discussion that I've often had with the principal there [boys' comprehensive]. But it was interesting to see that there was that difference of three hundred students, when we draw from the same kind of area, largely. (School 1, 2004)

However, as Ball and Gewirtz (1997, p.208) caution, '[i]t is as dangerous to generalise about the schooling of girls as it is to generalise about any other variety or type of schooling.' Of the girls' schools included in this study's sample, one is experiencing a major decline. According to the principal, there are many reasons for this and each school must be considered as a separate entity.

Part of that is demographics. When I came to the school, the Department gave me the demographic trend, which was going downhill. But they can never predict things like the drawing power of private schools opening up in the area....When you look at the history of this school, in the forty odd years it has been open it has always catered to micro-communities. So it will always cater to what the current influx of migrants is.

It's not a terribly positive outlook then, in terms of bringing into this area more able, more affluent young people?

No, it would need to be part of the equation for us. We see ourselves as dealing with the local community and who walks through the door and maximising their possibilities. We don't have a big focus on getting the top results in the state. Realistically, we're never going to compete with the schools that draw their kids from middle to upper class areas. (School 9, 2004)

In contrast, one principal of a boys' comprehensive school explains that his campus benefits from its location in a wealthy suburb of Sydney's inner west as well as very good access to public transport.

Are you at capacity?

Yes, yes. In a sense, we are at capacity...we've put in eight extra portables. But we are at capacity in that we only have a finite amount of space, as you can appreciate. Particularly with boys, you need to leave them open spaces for sport and playing and so on. So I've been trying to keep a cap on it - rather poorly, I must add, in the last couple of years - so that we don't get beyond 1200. I rather jokingly said at the beginning of the year my main target from an education point of view this year was to try and keep the population below 1200, meaning that we are reaching a stage where I certainly don't want any more portables, because it's impinging on the students' playing areas. It's difficult, though, to keep it below that, because daily there are people who walk into that front office and say, I want enrolment here, because I am in area, thank you very much. And they will give you all the evidence associated with that, and you don't have the resources to do the detective work, but in many cases it's not valid, and it's not accurate and it's not truthful. But they value education so much, without going into particular groups, that they just want their sons to be enrolled here, as opposed to other schools in the area. (School 4, 2004)

Given that School 4 attracts a very high proportion of its students from outside its nominal drawing area, and that it has a reputation for an academically and socially

successful culture, it must be regarded as comparable in appeal to its nearest non-government counterparts. Most of the latter institutions, as the principal pointed out, are also single-sex. It is important to note that the principal of School 4, in agreement with other school leaders interviewed for this study, dismissed the notion of parents preferring single-sex education for girls only, stressing that the very strong attraction of private boys' schools demonstrates that, in New South Wales at least, the single-sex characteristic is not a disincentive for those families. Likewise, the principal of another boys' comprehensive school pointed out that over one-third of the students in the local area enrol at non-government schools for secondary education, and those choices are almost all single-sex Catholic or independent boys' and girls' schools (School 2, 2004).

6.3.1 Choosing for boys' and girls' schools

In the absence of significant data relating to the New South Wales single-sex public schools, it is only possible to conclude that a proportion of parents actively chooses *against* the neighbourhood comprehensive, coeducational school, not that single-sex schools are chosen primarily because of their gender selectivity. This is supported by the findings of an investigation into parental choice of schools in New South Wales and Victoria, which concludes that 'it seems likely that other attributes are important because parents report that they do not, on average, attach great importance to whether the school is single-sex or not' (Beavis, 2004, p.19).

Only two of the comprehensive schools included in this research project had recently surveyed parents to ascertain the basis for selecting the school. One was a boys' school and the other an all-girls' school. Although those surveys focused most closely on subject choices and other aspects of the students' school careers, the principals claimed it was possible to conclude that gender segregation was neither a disincentive nor the most significant factor in parental choice. In the opinion of the school leaders who participated in this study, parents perceive a single-sex enrolment policy to be a contributing factor in the school's capacity to deliver the outcomes they considered most important: academic success and a disciplined environment. This is supported by the female principal of another girls' school, which conducts

annual surveys of incoming students' families.³ The principal maintained that few parents had any concerns about the gender admissions policy and were more interested in the subject choices and pastoral care.

When I talk at the Year 6 into 7 information nights, I always say to them 'Is single-sex an issue for you? Because I would address that at the end of the meeting.' I'd probably get half a dozen hands out of all the people and we run three information sessions because we can't fit them all into one. So they've already made up their minds, I'd say.

It's not an issue, obviously.

No, that's right. That's right. But for those six I will address it - or eight, or whatever. It's such a small number, it's virtually a non-event.

When we surveyed our Year 7 parents and asked them why they chose our school, we consistently got the same answer, so we just stopped doing it, because it was just another bit of work that we had to do. They said that the first thing was the academic excellence of the school. That was their number one, consistently. Number two is the fact that there is strong discipline in the school. Then they talked about a caring learning environment, and then, lastly, they mentioned single-sex. (Girls' comprehensive school, 2004)

It must be noted, however, that a majority of the principals from single-sex comprehensive schools perceives strong support in the community for single-sex education for girls, but less support for the all-boys' option. The male principal of one boys' comprehensive school explains this in terms of consumer-based notions of what works best for males and females.

I don't hear a great deal of support at all for boys' schools. I do hear support for girls' schools. Girls learn better in single-sex classes, so I hear, so therefore in a single-sex high school how much better is it going to be for them? They treat the boys as distractions. Boys behave more poorly than girls do and disrupt the girls' learning ... so the myth goes. But it's true, I suppose, that if you go into a co-educational high school and look at their suspension rates, most of them will be boys. Go and have a look at their detention list and most of them will be boys. So there's probably some truth in the fact that boys can

³ This girls' comprehensive school was not one of the seven included in the study but information was provided in a separate conversation with the principal.

be more exuberant, and picked on a little bit more than girls can be. So, well, let's send our kids into a single-sex girls' school, but when it comes to boys, well ... perhaps we should go to the co-educational one and be positively influenced by the girls that they're going to meet. (School 1, 2004)

Similarly, the female principal of a selective girls' school who has also served in single-sex comprehensive schools, says that,

There has always been a perception in the minds of parents of girls that they would like single-sex schooling. Whereas parents of boys – and this is just a gut feeling, after thirty years in the system – parents of boys want co-ed, and one wonders who is going to sacrifice their daughters to give somebody's son a co-ed experience. (School 8, 2004)

Another male principal of a boys' comprehensive school is of the view that, '[t]he single-sex nature of a school is a critical aspect of parental choice...The girls' schools are generally better off because there is a feeling that they are needed' (School 2, 2004). The principal of another all-boys' comprehensive, while not an advocate for single-sex education, supports this.

I know girls' schools work but I still think that co-education is the best way. I mean, we live as male and female and I think we need to have that sort of environment.

So in your opinion, where do schools like this one, and all of the other forty-six, fit within the system?

I guess they fit in because there is still a parental belief that single-sex is a good thing, and as I said, for girls it seems to work. (School 7, 2004)

This 'feeling' echoes the findings of other researchers. Gill (1992, p.4), for example, asserts that, 'the issue of single-sex schooling for girls transcends the limitations of empirical investigation.' Her studies found that the single-sex context had positive implications for the self-esteem of female students, but she also notes other results indicating that 'classroom processes build upon power differentials in the wider society and adapt them in terms of daily school practice' (p.4). In this regard, the principals of some schools indicate that parental decisions in favour of a girls' school frequently originate from a belief that equity (or equality) may be achieved more effectively in the absence of the opposite sex. The female principal of one girls'

comprehensive school says that parents' own school experiences play a major role in the choices they make with and for their daughters.

Because, I guess, from the historic point of view, one of the things that came out of the girls' education strategy was that girls had been neglected, to a great degree, in a co-educational setting, in terms of providing leadership opportunities. A culture had existed previously, of not quite subservience, but a lack of confidence in putting themselves forward for leadership. I think a lot of the parents that I'm dealing with are graduates of that kind of schooling themselves. So they look to a school like [girls' comprehensive school] as making sure that their daughters are getting every encouragement to speak out to, you know, have faith in themselves and to believe that they personally can make a difference to lives.

So you think that's a conscious choice?

Yes, I do. (School 3, 2004)

Several principals also suggest that the decisions about children's schooling tend to be made more frequently by mothers. This is supported by Aitchison (2002), whose Sydney-based study of consumer responses to the school choice agenda involved interviews with the parents of Year 6 students. Aitchison's (2002, p.10) early findings indicate that,

An enduring connection between childhood educational experiences of these mothers and their school choice making ... sometimes these early experiences are reflected more broadly in generalised views about types of schools or school systems, such as single sex schooling, private versus public education, religious schools, the selective school system and so on.

Some consumers may be cognisant of research findings that girls do better academically and make less traditional subject choices in all-girls' schools, but that boys tend to achieve better in mixed schools (for example, Lawrie & Brown, 1992; Foon, 1988; Rennie, 1987; Smith, 1986; Yates & Firkin, 1986; Dale, 1974).

A recent article from a Sydney newspaper points to the association between all-girls' schools and academic success, stating that,

A number of factors come into play in school choice. For example, the consistently high results achieved by students in girls' schools make single-gender schooling a first choice for many parents who want to make sure their daughters have every opportunity to excel. (Grossetti, 2006, p.2)

According to the male principal of one girls' comprehensive school, parental decisions about their sons' and daughters' schooling can be linked to perceptions of male behaviour.

It's to do with the roughness that tends to be associated with a lot of boys' schools, I think; that boisterousness. They haven't had the civilizing effects of females, if I might say it that way.

Which is why everyone wants their girls to be at this kind of school.

And their boys to be at co-ed. Yes, exactly. I don't think that parents send their boys to the boys' schools with any such enthusiasm - to protect them from the vagaries of sex and so forth; it's probably just because of convenience, or the fact that the boys' school has got a reputation and is getting good academic results, somewhere like Sydney Tech High, which is selective anyway ... (School 9, 2004)

A former senior education bureaucrat referred to the philosophical and practical complexity of the issue when he claimed that the NSW Department of Education and Training had 'no position or support mechanism on the question of boys' education', largely because of fears that girls might somehow be disadvantaged (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 2005, p.14). Starr and Gill (2002, p.33) warn that even the use of the term 'gender equity' is dangerous in that 'debates around coeducation can lead to a refusal to contemplate any single sex experience in schools for fear of being 'sexist'.' One informant in this study, a former principal and serving bureaucrat, comments that 'In NSW, in particular, parents think that single-sex education for girls is a good thing. *Building the Future* [recent policy document] fell apart to some extent because parents wanted single-sex for their daughters and co-ed for their sons' (Interview, Leonarder, 2004). This view, it should be noted, was expressed during the course of this study and well after Gill's (1992, p.3) assessment that 'a clear indication that single sex schooling was preferable for girls while boys enjoyed optimal educational experience in co-education would prove an insurmountable hurdle for the policy makers.'

The virtual absence of the single-sex schools from the discourse may, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, have helped to ensure their survival, because, to borrow from Hayes' (1998, p.7) description of the equity debate, they were 'regulated in the gaps between discourses'. It is arguable that the single-sex high schools have maintained their appeal because their low profile has permitted an uninterrupted focus on either boys or girls in contrast to the requirement of their coeducational counterparts to implement gender equity policies for both sexes. These schools have been able to innovate in ways that are not in conflict with contemporary notions of choice and diversity. It is possible that this has served to lessen the likelihood of controversy in terms of the schools' commitment to equality. No recent policy statements have adopted a position on the educational contribution of these variants. In previous chapters it has been shown that while the post-Wyndham critical era marked a strong focus on girls' education, there was no accompanying research emphasis on the existing single-sex public school alternatives. The principal of a comprehensive boys' school places the unresolved debate within a climate of consumer choice.

I'm sure some people are saying that they're not appropriate now, that they're not the healthiest educational environments. Whereas other people would say they're serving your needs, they're serving the needs of the community, and they do produce results. I can see the point of view of the other people, but I'm saying I'm working in an environment which is a joy to be in, and the students enjoy the culture here, and they enjoy the environment here. I think it would be a shame to contemplate modifying an environment like we've got here and I talk to our local politicians about that. I talk to people at the principals' council and so on about that. (School 4, 2004)

As mentioned already, much of the post-Wyndham focus, particularly during the critical era of the 1970s and 1980s when the single-sex provision was severely reduced, has been on redressing inequality by introducing programs for girls. The high proportion of over-subscribed girls' schools indicates that they find favour with consumers. It is interesting, therefore, to consider that the number of single-sex public schools of New South Wales is divided almost equally between the sexes, in an indication that both boys' and girls' institutions appeal to some consumers. A lack of survey data on this issue makes it impossible to determine the precise level of

consumer support for an option characterised by limited availability and unresolved debate. A logical extrapolation from this is that consumers will continue to choose for or against the schools on the basis of myths, perceptions and personal experience.

The complexity of the situation is revealed by other aspects of single-sex school operations that do not apply to coeducational schools. The fact that consumers can, and do, opt for out-of-area placements on the basis that a single-sex environment is more appropriate for their children, reflects a philosophical shift from the 1960s ideal. As already mentioned, a major consequence of this is that some schools are better placed to select from a wide range of applicants and thus increase their chances of achieving and sustaining high academic standards. Most importantly, however, consumer choice *for* the single-sex option, particularly when it is only accessible in another jurisdiction, reflects a valuing of this model in defiance of philosophical arguments about educating boys and girls together. It is this study's contention that the enduring appeal of a large number of single-sex public high schools offers evidence of a disjunction between education policy and consumer preferences.

A key aspect of the current education context is the aspiration of consumers to enrol their children at schools that are perceived to be successful. According to the principals, there is a strong correlation between the student population of a school, in terms of numbers and demographic diversity, and the students' willingness to travel. That is, the more appeal a single-sex school has, the more likely it is to draw students from a wide range of suburbs and socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, as will be seen in Chapter 7, there is evidence that the appeal of some single-sex schools, particularly those located in disadvantaged suburbs, is limited to the local area.

A feature of the Sydney education market, as already mentioned, is the willingness of families to enrol their children at schools located outside their neighbourhood. While 'selection by mortgage' is reflected in the choices made by many consumers, as discussed in a previous chapter, five of the seven principals interviewed for this study confirmed that many students travel great distances each day to reach the schools of their choice. At School 4, the principal stresses that his school's enrolment patterns are typical of the exercise of consumer choice.

The community is not defined in terms of, say, the surrounding two kilometers. You'd probably find, ironically, there'd be very few students within two kilometers of the school. We draw on... we have boys who come in from [outer Sydney] and probably further afield. I've never plotted it out, but dare I say, some of them come in here as in-area, stay for six months and then might find a location like [name of suburb], where it's more cost-effective for the family, and they're prepared to come in by rail to the school. That's a fairly common sort of decision that they'll make.

That reflects what I'm hearing constantly – that a good school has students who are prepared to travel.

They are. Yes, that's right.

It's a very Sydney phenomenon.

Yes. So a student will go to North Sydney Boys', for example, from Gosford, or a student will go from Campbelltown to Gosford. (School 4, 2004)

In the case of one girls' comprehensive that is well above capacity, the principal explains that,

Of the students applying to come here in Year 7 next year, about 70 come from the local area. About 170 are not from the local area so there is strong demand from further away. Some make a long journey to get to us. We are handy in the sense that we are not right on the railway line but we are close enough to the CBD that you could walk to the school and a lot of student catch buses to and fro. So demographics-wise, we are running at about one-third local students and about two-thirds from elsewhere. (School 5, 2005)

According to the principal of School 9, the enrolment trends epitomise the way in which some consumers actively choose against their local school if they perceive there to be a better alternative elsewhere. School 9 is in direct competition with another single-sex comprehensive school located only a short distance away.

Where do most of your girls come from? Are they local?

Oh yes.

Direct from the primary school?

There's this primary school, up the end of the road is [public primary school]. Across the road from the one here there's another one, [public primary school], directly across the road. Then you've got [public primary school]....From what I've gathered from the primary schools, their brighter kids apply to go to other schools. So we've got [girls' comprehensive] not so far away.

So where do the girls go?

They're about six kilometers away. Now they're interesting. When I was at [another girls' comprehensive], they were the poor relation. That was where the kids went that we rejected.

[Girls' comprehensive school]?

[Girls' comprehensive school]. They gradually built their profile up until they are a high-profile school now. That school is now seen to be the place to try and get your girls into. So if the brighter kids apply to go there then they'll obviously take them. When we get our data back from the literacy tests, it shows that the kids are grouped in primary school into bottom 30 per cent, middle 40 per cent, top 30 per cent, on the basis of their basic skills testing. Now when we get the data on the kids that come into this school, we are only getting kids from the bottom 30 and the middle 40 per cent. We would get a maximum of a dozen out of that top 30 per cent. So the student body doesn't have that academic top end, which makes it really hard when you're trying to set standards for kids; really hard. So you're always fighting that battle. (School 9, 2004)

According to the principal, the capacity of the rival single-sex public high school to attract more able students – a high proportion of these being non-local – means that School 9 will become less likely to achieve the high academic results many consumers look for. The principal acknowledges the difficulty of reversing negative consumer perceptions, even when there are many good programs in place. Given the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the school's location, he believes it is unlikely that it could compete for students in the same way as a school drawing from more affluent suburbs. Thus it is arguable that the current market-driven context, as described earlier, renders the neighbourhood comprehensive model almost inevitably uncompetitive once a school is perceived to be either underperforming or located in an undesirable area, or both. Ball (2003) maintains that the overall climate of a school is a critical factor in consumer decision-making. Similarly, Campbell's (2005, p.9) conclusion, based on a study of New South Wales education, is that 'too

many students from ethnically alien or poor areas become a threat to successful middle class strategies.’ In Chapter 7 this is discussed with specific reference to two single-sex public schools.

The influence of consumer choice, coupled with the blurring of traditional school boundaries, offers evidence that the concept of notional drawing areas may have been permanently superseded. As discussed earlier in this thesis, a fundamental feature of the comprehensive school model was to be the enrolment of students of all abilities and backgrounds from the neighbourhood. According to the principal of School 9, part of the dilemma for school principals is that they now compete for students not only with non-government schools but also with their public school counterparts.

Public schools, in particular, don’t want to pull their clients from other public schools, so the debate these days is more to look at how we can get them back from the private schools, if indeed we have lost them there. So the active promotion of our schools has pretty much been left to individual schools themselves. In the last twelve to eighteen months the DET has seen the need to put that on a more global level. It’s an interesting discussion point, really, because if you are a school in a community you must look at where your students are coming from and going to and particularly with the feeder primary, which you know are local for your high school, you ask yourself why are they coming, and if they’re not, why aren’t they? At the moment I don’t believe we need to do heavy promotion every year, to attract Year 6 girls into Year 7, based on the numbers we have currently got, unless we wanted to change the clientele in some way. But that is an unwritten script. We don’t have that need but it would be a question considered by every school in the community. (School 5, 2005)

There is evidence that in the current context it has become essential for schools to consider why students are staying in their communities, and ‘if they’re not, why aren’t they?’ While none of the participants in this study is critical of families who choose schools outside their local area, all are conscious that this reflects a degree of rejection of the ‘neighbourhood’ school model. Such a shift, they note, has particular consequences for their schools to which the institutions themselves must adjust. Apart from the active choice made by families *for* these schools, there may be implications for the academic success of such institutions as a result of parental aspirations, a narrower focus on the formal curriculum and reduced emphasis on activities that the

school might offer outside the normal day. The fact that a large proportion of students come from outside the nominal drawing areas means that their social lives tend to take place at some distance from the school. The school is less easily accessible, which places possible constraints on the expectations schools can have of students and their families and the uptake of other activities.

There is a characteristic which is really important and that is that if they are coming predominantly from out of area, the school community is very diverse, both geographically and culturally. That brings with it some challenges, such as if you want to hold a parent meeting. It is not easy to get them. They come from afar and have the usual work commitments and all of that. Any school that draws predominantly from out of area will have those frustrations. (School 5, 2005)

Taking into consideration the competitive climate in which all schools now operate, it is arguable that the enduring appeal of the single-sex option represents a challenge to the traditional neighbourhood comprehensive school model as well as to what Riordan (2002, p.11) describes as the 'protective halo around co-education as an institution.'

6.4 A hierarchy of schools

The principals contributing to this study testify that not only do education consumers want choice, they do not reject a school on the basis of gender segregation. This section examines their assertions that the contemporary education market consists of a hierarchy of schools in which the comprehensive, coeducational public school has the lowest status. According to the principal of one boys' school, there is a general consensus among parents about the appeal of different school types.

So you have the private schools up the top and then you have the selective schools and then within those probably a selective girls' school above a selective boys' school. And then, regrettably, at the bottom of the heap as they [the parents] would perceive it, the comprehensive, co-educational schools. (School 6, 2004)

The current tension between the discourses of 'equality of opportunity' and 'choice = equity' is reflected in part in the rise of what Connell (1998, p.8) calls 'ruling-class schools'. These schools, while not always academically selective⁴, are found in both government and non-government sectors, include both single-sex and coeducational models and place the strongest emphasis on their students' academic performance. The schools 'at the bottom of the heap' have considerably less appeal in this regard. However, it is useful to consider whether perceptions of a hierarchy of schools may be a consequence, or a cause, of an education policy context that privileges consumer choice. The fact that the majority of single-sex public schools are comprehensive in nature, ostensibly locates them with their coeducational peers. However, the limited geographic distribution of the single-sex variants means that the notion of 'choice' is highly qualified. On the other hand, the high demand for places at some girls' and boys' comprehensive schools arguably makes them de facto [academically] selective schools, raising their status in the hierarchy.

All comprehensive school principals interviewed for this study acknowledge the pressure to maintain enrolment levels in a competitive education environment. A majority identify the public system's academically selective schools as having a

⁴ Only one private school in New South Wales applies academic selectivity – Sydney Grammar School, which is for boys only.

negative impact on the comprehensives because of their capacity to attract the most able students.

The problem is the selectivity structure, quite frankly. That shouldn't exist. It's ridiculous. And if it didn't exist, you would find that the [single-sex boys' school] of the world and [co-educational comprehensive] and so on, that they would have a greater percentage of, if you like, more academically interested students, and you'd have a better wholesome mix, like here. And you'd have a better educational curriculum environment.

So the selective schools really are having a detrimental effect?

Oh, without a doubt. (School 4, 2004)

The principal of another all-boys' comprehensive school illustrates the issue of residualisation that has been highlighted in previous sections. Although it currently draws from a staunchly 'Anglo' middle class area, his school possibly suffers less from being a boys' school than from being a comprehensive school in a region that is replete with alternatives.

... it was over a thousand in the sixties; in the seventies it was over a thousand. By 1988 it had drifted back to about 800, and then in the early nineties it dropped right away.

So where were they going?

Part of that would have been that [selective boys' school] opened in the early nineties, and this area's a very affluent area. A lot of the ... a majority of the boys in the south direction - they'd be going to private schools. I mean, we only still got one boy from [primary school] to come here for our Year 6 intake. And then you have the other private schools and Catholic schools ...

Yes.

And then there's [selective co-ed]. So it's sort of like a second tier, or third tier, to send your boy to [boys' comprehensive]. So that's the sort of thing we've been fighting for a long time. (School 2, 2004)

The principal of another boys' school is adamant that, 'I'm not an advocate for selective high schools – you won't find me in one of those' (School 1, 2004). From one girls' school the comment is that,

Well, I really think ... if you were to ask me which way public education should go, I think there should be a local co-educational high school that should provide for the needs of every student. And I would include that there shouldn't be selective schools in that, because I feel that as a local comprehensive high school, you should be providing for all those kids, right across the range. And if you're not, instead of pulling the kids out, you should be looking at what's going on with the teaching, and why aren't you? That's my philosophy. And I say that as the principal of a girls' school. I've talked with parents about it. (School 9, 2004)

Differentiation on the basis of specialist curriculum emphases is identified as another systemic marketing strategy that encourages selectivity to the detriment of the comprehensive schools. For example, one principal contends that giving some comprehensive schools a specialist title (i.e. Technology. Sports, Creative Arts or Languages High School) confers a status that implicitly reflects on the schools that do not have this nomenclature, and enables distinction in a competitive education market.

One of those boys at our school came top of the state in Visual Arts. Over at [specialist comprehensive public school], they didn't have any students in the 90s. They had no student whose work was in ArtExpress. So this creative arts nomenclature is a thorn in our side that doesn't reflect the reality of what happens in those faculties.

We have elective music classes running in Years 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. We have drama classes running in Years 9, 10, 11 and 12. We have a qualified drama teacher. Over there, they've got an English teacher teaching drama, or at least it was, until this year. So what we're doing in the creative arts outstrips what's happening in a creative arts high school but because of the nomenclature, parents have the perception that that's where you would go to study creative arts. (School 1, 2004)

The principals' belief in the existence of a hierarchy of government and non-government schools, together with the acknowledgement of rivalry within their own system, offers some support for this study's argument that the current education context opens up possibilities for the single-sex schools to position themselves more distinctively in the marketplace.

6.5 A 'special something' in public education

As key strategists in the marketing process, principals were asked about their personal and professional advocacy of the single-sex option. The decisions made by principals to differentiate their schools, it is argued, make them most likely to identify the 'special something' that holds appeal for consumers.

Given the uncertain place of the single-sex model in the public sector, it is perhaps not surprising that the seven principals of the sample schools reveal a range of attitudes. Of the three who are not supportive of single-sex education, two principals are ambivalent and one is strongly against the structure. None see any conflict between their personal views and their professional capacity to lead such a school. Nor is any of the three willing to be described as what Ball and Gewirtz (1997, p.211) refer to as 'an unequivocal comprehensivist' in an era characterised by the need to respond to a competitive education market. For example, the male principal of an all-girls' school is not aware of persuasive arguments against them.

Should we have single-sex schools? I see them as a choice that should be offered, based particularly on what families ask for. Why can't you have a bit of everything? I know I have heard strong arguments against selective schools from time to time, but I can't say I have ever heard any strong arguments against single-sex schools...And why would you not have them? They are not failing, or a better way to put it is, they aren't not fulfilling what they should be. They seem to be doing okay. Not all, but most. I don't see them in the same basket as the selective schools but in itself that is a similar set-up, in that it isn't always a co-educational, comprehensive structure. (School 5, 2005)

This statement articulates the dichotomy that has already been raised as a central theme in this study. That is, the state government's official commitment is to the 'neighbourhood' model but today's schools and their leaders are answerable to consumers who expect diversity and choice in the public provision. This principal also considers that the issue is not about gender differences in general but about being responsive to the particular group of students in his school, who happen to be all females.

Your school is a comprehensive school, as far as the Department is concerned. How, if at all, does the DET

distinguish between coeducational comprehensives and single-sex comprehensives?

I don't have a clear definition or distinction in my head. They are words that describe our schools. How do I describe this school? We are a girls' school with a very, very broad curriculum and my head doesn't see any difference. My definition of comprehensive is that we offer a broad curriculum, many different opportunities for girls...I know we don't have any boys here but how does that then influence what we do? There will be some differences in terms of the curriculum offering, but the curriculum is driven by what the girls want. (School 5, 2005)

In contrast, the male principal of a boys' comprehensive school says that while coeducation is generally considered a more 'normal' environment, there is evidence that for some students the single-sex structure can be helpful.

So it's acknowledging a community wish.

Yes, I think so. I don't think it is a valid one, because I have taught girls in co-ed schools where they have been excellent. I think it all stems from how you go about the teaching and providing the opportunities. But I guess where there is a focus for girls and boys, it can work. I mean, my boys might not do debating in a co-ed school, for instance, whereas it's quite OK for them to be debaters or public speakers because that is what they get the opportunity to do. You know, most debating teams in co-ed schools are stacked with girls but here they get in and do it. We won the regional debating competition two years ago. This year we haven't done as well but it's horses for courses.

But you are not a passionate advocate of single-sex schools?

No, I am not a passionate advocate. I am certainly more in line with trying to establish community norms. That is not to say that I am not passionate about this school. I think it needs to continue to exist because it provides the community with particular services and it has a long tradition of successes. (School 7, 2004)

If, as seems logical, 'particular services' means the provision of education within single-sex alternatives, then it is important to note that these are associated with success. This principal points to something that he acknowledges cannot be found in the coeducational equivalent. In this sense, the 'particular services' referred to earlier may be regarded as the capacity of the single-sex schools to respond to their students

more effectively, because the population is selective by sex. Notwithstanding their official adherence to a comprehensive system, the principals' attitudes appear to support Watterson's (2001, p.21) suggestion that 'equality of opportunity and outcomes in education for girls and boys may require differential provision, at least for a period of time'.

Four principals express strong support for the retention of the single-sex option. The female principal of one girls' comprehensive school is explicit about the importance of offering separate schools for girls.

So would you describe yourself as an advocate for single-sex schools within the government system?

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. Not only because I have taught with disadvantaged girls who wouldn't have had an opportunity if it hadn't been for a girls' school. But I think because this school has a real commitment to developing female leaders, and female leaders who are really compassionate, who are committed, who can and do make a difference every day when they've left this school. (School 3, 2004)

For the male principal of one all-boys' school the major benefit is less philosophical than practical. He identifies the unique capacity of a single-sex school to refine its focus on teaching and learning.

I've not had a background in boys' education so I had to do some pretty careful looking at what strategies we might put in that were more suited to boys than to girls, because we had the luxury of being able to focus on those. As a boys' high school, we could look at, well, what really are... what are the best ways boys learn, what are the greatest needs of boys? We could focus on those and not be diverted, I guess, by having girls in the school so there's an advantage of being in a boys' school. (School 1, 2004)

Likewise, another male principal of an oversubscribed boys' comprehensive school refers to the increased potential for supporting the students' academic progress.

My background is one of – not really by choice – one of boys' high schools, extended with some work at tertiary education and also in co-ed environments.

Did your experience at all those boys' schools help, do you think, in terms of becoming principal at a boys' school?

I think that yes, it has certainly been an advantage for me personally. In coming here I have initiated a lot of study skills programs that I'm passionately involved with, because I know that boys require it from Year 7 to Year 12; they need it progressively implemented. And that's why we've gone about those programs. They need ideas and techniques very clearly spelt out to them, about how to cope with a long-term task, for example in Year 7 and in Year 12. And for every population in a comprehensive high school like this, you've got, say 200 boys on average, in any one year – 20per cent to 25per cent of them whom you could call, very crudely, under-achievers. And one of the reasons they underachieve is motivation, but I think they struggle with study methodologies as well. (School 4, 2004)

The gender-differentiated focus promoted by some girls' and boys' comprehensive schools may thus reflect the appropriation of discourses that highlight disadvantage experienced by both sexes. In their suggestion that documents such as *Gender equity: A framework for Australian schools* (MCEETYA, 1997) have shifted the focus from girls' disadvantage to the inequities experienced by both males (at school) and females (post-school), Ailwood and Lingard (2001, p.11) claim that these are 'artifacts of complex discursive machinations...a discursive conglomerate of particular compromises and particular moments in power-knowledge relations.' They suggest that the production of such discourses evolves 'as much through silences, exclusions and marginalisations, as through that which is spoken' (p.12). Hayes (1998, p.5) says that this may reflect the ways in which 'power relations as notions of disadvantage are contested and struggled over.' As will be seen in this and later sections, the marketing strategies employed by some single-sex schools bear a direct relationship to current discourses of masculinity and femininity and appeal to consumers on the basis that gender-differentiated schooling can remediate current and future challenges for both boys and girls.

The principals from schools 1, 2, 4 and 7 all report that they place a major emphasis on supporting the academic performance of boys. All of the principals of boys' schools refer in detail to academic support programs. Each of these principals had either sought out experts in boys' education to advise on pedagogy, behaviour management and other issues, or had introduced school-based initiatives to address

these specific areas. In contrast, only one of the three girls' comprehensive school principals mentions similar concerns.

Although the principal of School 7, a boys' comprehensive, hesitates to advocate single-sex education per se, he too identifies the schools' same-sex populations as a key element influencing the delivery of the curriculum and other programs. This suggests that these school leaders see themselves as operating in a culture that demands different operational approaches. One male principal's view is based on direct comparison between all-male and all-female campuses.

Knowing what I know now, I realise that I taught a certain way at co-ed schools and did not change at all when I went to an all-girls' school for ten years, but I changed totally when I moved to a boys' school. It was an epiphany. I was hit between the eyes by this realisation. (School 2, 2004)

School 2, as described in an earlier chapter, nearly closed during the critical era of the 1980s because of falling enrolments. Increased affluence in the area and other demographic changes, combined with the establishment of many non-government alternatives, have placed pressure on the school to distinguish itself in a competitive education market. This principal, like his peers at Schools 1, 4 and 7, has actively promoted the concept of a 'boy-friendly' learning environment, where school-based programs have been developed to support students' academic needs.

On the other hand, the female principal of School 3, a girls' comprehensive, stresses that she inherited a tradition of student success. Her school is oversubscribed and its results consistently high, perhaps bestowing a freedom to promote a different 'special something' in the form of the emphasis on leadership skills. The presumption of academic success for girls, according to this principal, enables a greater focus on the school's capacity to prepare its students in other ways for post-school destinations.

You've got to remember that many of these [girls' public] schools were home science high schools. And those girls' schools had to reinvent themselves to have a full 7 to 12 academic focus. We were one of the first that said no [to the limited curriculum] ... we have always been about creating female leaders. And I think it's a very significant difference. (School 3, 2004)

Drawing again on Salomone (2003), this statement may be interpreted as a rejection of the discriminatory practices of the past, whereby the school, albeit indirectly, claims membership of a new generation of single-sex institutions.

6.6 Marketing the single-sex alternative

This section focuses on the marketing strategies of the single-sex schools in the attempt to identify the ‘special something’ that may hold appeal for consumers. As discussed earlier, not all schools are able to attract students on the basis of academic success. These schools seek other strategies to represent themselves as being particularly responsive to the needs of boys and girls. In this and later sections attention is drawn to the methods used by some schools to market their distinctive nature and operations. In reference to the official support provided to schools, one principal comments that,

You might be aware that the Department of Education has issued a CD to schools saying, ‘Prepare your promotional plan.’ I can’t tell you what’s on the CD although I’ve received it. There are no funds attached to that plan. Until such time as there are identified funds that say this is how the Department is going to support you, I’m quite happy to do what we have been doing, which is maintaining very cordial relations with our local press. We probably about once a month would have a positive story in the local newspaper. We have an extensive program, as I said, of afternoon visits. We’ve probably had through the school so far this year about five hundred Year 6 students come to visit us. Now that’s a pretty strong word-of-mouth. (School 3, 2004)

The marketing strategies adopted by schools vary greatly as a result of the schools’ reliance on human volunteers and adequate financial resources to generate print and electronic material. One example of this is evident in a comparison of school websites undertaken during the early research phase of this study. The website of a comprehensive school in an affluent suburb showed the gates swinging open to reveal beautiful tree-lined paths and peaceful scenes of girls going about their daily routines. On the other hand, the online presence of a boys’ school located in a disadvantaged area of Sydney consisted of a very simple series of pages and a copy of the latest newsletter.

Such a contrast epitomises the dilemma for the schools that struggle to attract students and cannot afford extra money for marketing. In the words of the principal of one girls' school,

We market the school in terms of letting the parents know that we care for the kids, spend a lot of time talking to them, etcetera etcetera. I don't put money into glossy brochures, and I don't put money into anything else. (School 9, 2004)

The struggle to attract students suggests an association between effective marketing and perceptions of a successful school. For example, a lack of publicly available information may also lead to the circulation of myths, both positive and negative. There is evidence of the need for schools to be pro-active in this regard. After surveying parents at thirteen schools in one Sydney district, Groundwater-Smith (2001, p.14) found that 'schools need to develop positive images of themselves and communicate these to the community at every opportunity...if the school does not attend to [such advice] then rumour and speculation will become the source of information about the school.'

The principal of a boys' comprehensive gives a detailed description of the strategic choices that schools are often required to make and how this is contingent on the financial resources available to them,

Because a school has to look after all of that [developing marketing materials] and fund it themselves, generally what a school will hand out - what a school will have on offer - is a reflection of how much money the school has. (School 1, 2004)

According to this principal's testimony, the schools receive no dedicated funds from the DET for marketing ('not a cent'), meaning that any such expenditure must be weighed against other demands.

I have asked for a thousand dollars to be put aside, and in fact, I've got about \$1500, I think, to print a glossy brochure. But it'll be that size. So you'll open it up that way. I have written all the text for it, and I've got somebody going through a whole lot of photos at the moment, to select some photographs for it. One of the office staff is doing that. I've got the photos there. I've taken them and I've put them on to our network for a lady in the back office to go through and pull them out.

We've got a parent who's a graphic designer, and she's going to do the design of it, and so that cost will be for the actual physical printing of a thousand copies of that. And that would be a glossy that I can use when I go out and talk to parents. But we look for other ways of bringing the school to people's attention and so we do things like this. The local paper is [name] and we get them out here every time something happens, so they print articles, and that raises the profile of the school. So they're just cuttings of the last couple of years of articles. We get a lot of stuff in. So you know, things like that. That doesn't cost us any dollars so we look for the stuff that costs us less. I mean, I'm not saying there isn't money for us to produce a wonderful glossy prospectus that costs us, you know, 5, 6, 7 ... \$10,000 to do. I could do that, if I asked for the money from the school council. But where does that money come from? It's going to come out of the faculties, out of the teachers' programs that they want to run, and the faculty budgets, out of the concert band... that's where it's going to come from, and that's not the way I want to run the place. And there may be other schools that say - and I know this philosophy exists - 'Well, it's money well spent, you need to get out there and market your school. The more kids you get into your school, the more funds they put in through school fees, the more disposable income you're going to have.' Which argument do you want to follow? I go for the one that says let's keep most of our money sitting where our core business lies, in our teaching and learning, and the opportunities we offer to the kids. Let's do the best we can by putting something together that's not glossy but ... mind you, for some people and for special occasions ... we have done something special. (School 1, 2004)

This principal's reiteration of the imperative to 'get out there and market your school' is one of the key themes of this study. As already mentioned, all schools operate currently in a context of competition that crosses private and public sector boundaries. In recent years there have been some tentative moves to argue for differential provision in order to be able to identify and address the needs of particular cohorts and individuals (Watterson, 2001). School 1's principal exemplifies the pressure under which many school leaders must work to maintain enrolments. The school's publicity material emphasises the longstanding and pro-active strategies that have been adopted to address the particular academic and social challenges faced by many boys.

As will be seen in the following section, which examines the schools' electronic marketing, School 1's approach reflects a high degree of responsiveness to students and the public acknowledgement of the dominant discourses about the needs of males and females during the compulsory years of schooling.

6.6.1 Marketing semiology

As noted in previous chapters, the primary source of information about the New South Wales public system is the NSW Department of Education and Training's website.⁵ A close reading of the official descriptions of the New South Wales single-sex schools reveals distinctive patterns in the language used to describe boys' schools and girls' comprehensive schools. These descriptions, typically approximately one page in length, are posted on the website and offer consumers the first school-specific details available through this medium. In a process undertaken three times during the course of this study⁶, the descriptions of single-sex comprehensive schools were examined for semiological patterns. Any words and phrases that communicated similar messages from at least three schools were noted. These words and phrases were then sorted and grouped under headings that emerged from the sorting process: the school, the students, the curriculum and the focus on one gender.⁷

Table 6.3, together with the testimony of principals, provides evidence that although the single-sex schools are nominally regarded as comprehensive schools, their selectivity by sex is a differentiating factor that affects most or all aspects of their operations. It is argued that many boys' and girls' schools divide themselves along the lines of dual discourses of disadvantage.

See print copy for figure 6.3

In general terms the girls' schools emphasise academic achievement and preparing females for success in their post-school lives. Conversely, the descriptions of the mission of the boys' schools drew much more frequently on the notion of boys as disadvantaged subjects, many needing substantial emotional and remedial support in order to achieve success in their school careers.

In the adoption of particular marketing semiology, the single-sex comprehensive variants seem to point towards the 'special something' that holds an enduring appeal for consumers. The schools' admission of only one sex permits them to claim a special focus on the needs of either boys or girls. If, as seems to be particularly true of the girls' schools, this focus is associated with high scholastic achievement and well-developed personal skills, then the single-sex comprehensive variant is represented more distinctively in an otherwise low-status group. One school's description encapsulates this on its website where prospective students and their families are told that '[Girls' comprehensive] High School is recognised as a leader in girls' education in one of the most competitive schooling areas in Australia.' The inference is that the school competes successfully with schools in both the private and public sectors. It is arguable that the school's comprehensive status is overshadowed by the emphasis on catering for female students. The school therefore actively differentiates itself from its

coeducational peers and, by extension, from the traditional 'neighbourhood' comprehensive ideal.

Table 6.3 also reveals that none of the schools' official summaries contained any mention of DET policy regarding single-sex education. The absence of such detailed policy statements, as referred to earlier in this study, may partly explain why the summaries differed so markedly in content, tone, length and style. Several school descriptions made no reference at all to their single-sex status, presumably believing that the school name was enough information in this regard. Many referred to themselves as 'a boys' comprehensive school' or 'a girls' comprehensive school' but there was no further reference to their gender-segregated environment. Several pointed to their longstanding role in the community and their adherence to the school's traditions and values. In general, however, the schools tended to identify a relationship between their single-sex structure and some aspect of their programs.

It is important to note that I included one descriptor in Table 6.3 in spite of, or indeed because of, a low frequency of references. A relationship with a school of the opposite sex was mentioned by only two schools. It is arguable that in the schools' estimation this issue is of little concern to consumers. Perhaps, as the principal of School 2 claims, contemporary society offers many more opportunities for students of both sexes to mix and this is not a responsibility that the schools are expected to shoulder. I suggest that this is further evidence that consumer support for the single-sex alternative represents a rejection of the post-Wyndham emphasis on coeducation as a 'normal' environment.

6.6.1.1 The school

Meadmore and Meadmore's (2004) discourse analysis of promotional material reveals that the overall school climate is now portrayed as contributing directly to a successful educational experience. They conclude that '[i]n recent advertisements, schools are promoting the safety aspect of their environments ... Caring, sharing communities of people with well-developed emotions make societies more manageable, more predictable and safer for everyone' (p.382). Groundwater-Smith's

(2001, p.15) consideration of the factors influencing consumer choice in one Sydney school district resulted in the conclusion that,

It is clear that choosing a school where there are good opportunities for diversity in curriculum selection in a safe and happy environment is of paramount concern. At the same time and in a number of cases, positive statements were made regarding schools that were relatively small in size.

Similarly, the principal of one Sydney boys' school says that contemporary single-sex schools are regarded as 'secure, safe environments...running programs that are academically rigorous but still offer opportunities for sport and other extra-curricular activities' (School 4, 2004). As seen in Table 6.3, twice as many boys' as girls' schools promoted themselves as caring places, although equal numbers of boys' and girls' schools referred to themselves as being 'safe'. Some extracts from the descriptions of boys' schools illustrate the association of care and safety with an academically effective school climate.

... we strive to create a caring, supportive environment in which each student is challenged in his learning to become the best he can be as a citizen of our world. The school seeks to provide a safe environment ...

*

[Boys'] High School strives to promote excellence in learning through care and discipline.

*

The school is fortunate to be served by a thoughtful, caring and professional staff who demonstrate skill and commitment and work as a cohesive team to provide quality learning experiences ...

*

There is a strong focus on quality learning in a safe, well-disciplined and supportive environment that fosters individual learning and the achievement of personal best.

A new ethic of care, promoted as particularly responsive to the needs of whichever sex is admitted, may therefore frame the professional approach of these schools. The schools can, and do, claim that the climate is one in which highly specialised – and, by implication, more effective – care can be delivered to individual students, offering a subtle challenge to the notion that only a coeducational setting can deliver equality, or that equality means identical treatment. Notably, as shown in Table 6.3, only two schools – both all-girls' – made a reference to a commitment to equality of

opportunity in education. This may also reflect the schools' assessment that students and parents take this aspect of the contemporary provision for granted. That is, there is no reason for consumers to suspect that the curriculum discriminates between the sexes, particularly when this has been the focus of reform for many decades. This suggests, perhaps, that other concerns relating to boys' and girls' education have supplanted older discourses about equality.

The lack of official distinction between the single-sex and coeducational comprehensive schools is a further indication of the system's view that, at least in terms of the curriculum and minimum standards of resourcing, there is equality of opportunity. None of the principals interviewed for this research project raise the issue, but instead point to other, evolving, manifestations of inequity across whole school populations of both boys and girls. The principals' references to the difficulties experienced by students from poorer communities echo the findings of Teese (cited in Slamet, 2003, p.28) that 'the greater the socio-economic advantage, the smaller the performance gap between boys and girls in mathematics, science and English. The gender gap widens for students with more socio-economic problems.' As seen in Table 6.3, four times as many boys' as girls' schools proclaimed their disadvantaged status on the DET website. While one school made this a positive statement, saying that students had been 'well supported' by the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP), others pointed out that this was to be the final year in which the school qualified for the program. If, as Teese posits, there is a correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and weaker academic performance, then the descriptions posted for the single-sex boys' schools are indicative of the purposeful introduction of strategies to address this. They cannot be refuted in their claim to place a special focus on the needs of male students, since this is the group with which they work exclusively. According to Lingard (1998, p.1),

The 'what about the boys?' refrain in contemporary discourse is one element of a broader masculinity politics which attempts to argue that men are the new disadvantaged and that masculinity is under siege and in crisis in the face of the putative success of the feminist reform project.

According to Hayes (1998, p.4), '[b]efore the shift from differential to equitable provision in the seventies, a problem was not seen to exist and the 'educationally

disadvantaged subject' did not exist.' In the 1970s, she says, all girls were considered to be disadvantaged. Hayes (1998, p.6) argues that while girls' successes were celebrated in the 1990s, boys began to attract attention for 'being poor communicators and falling behind girls.' They were 'more likely than girls to be truants, to drop out of school and to demonstrate behavioural problems' (p.6). This may account in part for the proportionately greater focus on behaviour, discipline, welfare and remedial programs seen in Table 6.3.

As revealed by the data collected for Table 6.3, a higher number of boys' schools claimed particular expertise in meeting the needs of their students, and twice the number of boys' schools mentioned a focus on welfare. Additionally, only one girls' school referred specifically to a focus on literacy and numeracy whereas six boys' schools cited this feature. Examples taken from the official website indicate that many of these institutions see their mission as different from that of girls' and coeducational schools. Each of the following is a claim made by an all-boys comprehensive school.

The school is a boys' school. It focuses on the unique needs of boys in contemporary society.

*

The school focuses on boys' education, welfare and runs an intensive literacy program.

*

[Boys' comprehensive] strives to promote excellence in learning through care and discipline. Providing for the educational and welfare needs of boys is a particular focus of this school.

*

The school places a strong emphasis on student welfare and creating an educational climate that allows all boys to achieve.

*

The school is widely recognised for its programs to meet the needs of boys.

*

The school offers widely acclaimed welfare programs that nurture a positive learning climate, [and] a wealth of expertise in literacy and numeracy, specialising in strategies for boys' education.

Few boys' schools referred to a 'tradition of academic excellence', although one emphasised that it 'has a proven record of outstanding academic results and sporting achievements.' One school claimed a place 'at the forefront of successfully educating

boys in the new millennium...we have cutting edge strategies for maximising boys' performance.'

There is evidence that the enduring appeal of boys' schools may also be associated with different expectations of male students and assumptions about the climate in which boys are most likely to learn. For example, the principal of one boys' school comments that, 'Parents are obsessed by discipline for boys and keeping them on a tight leash.' (School 2, 2004) Another reflects that parents associate strong discipline with an effective school experience for males and that such perceptions can have a major effect on boys' schools' enrolments.

A few years ago, it was more of an issue as I understand it, because this school didn't have quite the same reputation for discipline and following up discipline as it has at the moment. We've pulled out all the stops and we're trying to work with the community to make sure that the behaviour of the students outside the school is acceptable. And we've done that and the parents are very happy about what's happened. Parents of primary kids are very happy about what they're seeing.

And when they have perceptions or ideas about schools, would they normally ask you directly about those issues?

The only thing they've ever asked me about – and I've been doing this now for three years, going out to the primary schools in 2002, 2003 and 2004 – is discipline. That's the only question that comes up that looks at perceptions ... but the true core business of what we're involved in, no.

Not academic success?

Not academic success, no. (School 1, 2004)

The semiology of the boys' schools' publicity shows a greater emphasis on the need for students to create a learning environment through respectful behaviour. For example, one boys' school's credo states that 'Everyone has the right to be safe, happy and get on with their work.' Another summarises that,

Students have a right to learn and staff have a right to teach; parents, staff and students are partners in promoting socially acceptable behaviour; students and staff have a right to be safe and happy at school; students accept responsibility for their learning, behaviour and attendance; students, parents and staff

are partners in promoting the school as a place of learning, harmony and safety ...

This preoccupation with discipline is not limited to boys' schools, however. According to the principal of an oversubscribed girls' school, who had also been at a boys' comprehensive school, consumers make judgements about schools based on non-academic issues. In his opinion, '[t]hey [parents] are looking for well-organised, well-disciplined, highly values-based schools.' (School 5, 2005)

The official description of one girls' school stated that it is 'committed to creating a stimulating, disciplined and purposeful learning environment that encourages students to pursue excellence ...' However, as shown in Table 6.3, girls' schools demonstrated a preference for the word 'self-discipline', as in this example,

We ... strive to provide a broad academic education in a caring and creative environment. The school maintains a strong emphasis on traditional values, self-discipline and social responsibility.

Some research has found an increasing link between what Ball and Gewirtz (1997) refer to as 'modernism and academism'. In their study of two highly successful all-girls' state schools in England, they found that the single-sex option provided both institutions with instant market 'niches'. However, the schools deliberately presented themselves as socially progressive and academically purposeful, in order that they not risk being associated with discriminatory practices of the past. An interview with one of the British principals from that study elicited an emphasis on the construction of a culture that blends tradition and ambition. That school's leader reflected that,

What I'd like to think we stand for is discipline and academic achievement and I mean we are very strongly a working school. If I showed you around here I think you'd be quite impressed by that, although 50 per cent of our children come from deprived areas, but I don't think you'd feel that going round the school, it's quite academic, in the best sense really. (Ball & Gewirtz 1997, p.213)

Similarly, a survey of 609 families in New South Wales and Victoria found that consumer choice of schools was based primarily on 'the extent to which the school embraced traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself and the requirement that a uniform be worn' (Beavis,

2004, p.12). The wearing of full school uniform as representative of a school's disciplinary code was raised by principals informing this study. In their emphasis on the uniform as a symbol of discipline, the principals may be seen to subtly appropriate some of the practices of their private school counterparts. Such a strategy may also constitute what Meadmore and Meadmore (2004) describe as the coalescence of tradition and enterprise.

Such coalescence, this study asserts, is reflected in the New South Wales schools' portrayal of a pro-academic culture, wherein the single-sex structure is linked with students' academically purposeful behaviour. As mentioned already, the curriculum offerings of the single-sex schools are indistinguishable from those of their coeducational equivalents. Of the seven single-sex comprehensive schools referred to in this study, three were selected in part because of their demonstrable academic success. That is, their Higher School Certificate results consistently place them in the top 20 per cent of all New South Wales public schools. The principals of all three schools identify their academic programs as having the strongest appeal for prospective parents. One principal describes his emphasis on the capacity of an all-boys' comprehensive school to cater for a very broad range of ability.

It's got a long tradition, and it's got a healthy tradition in the sense that it's got an academic tradition. It was at one stage a selective school, I believe. We do most, if not all, things that the [academically] selective schools do.

I quite honestly say to parents who are thinking about this school as opposed to a selective school, that probably the only thing that we would lack is the homogeneity that an average class might have at Fort Street or Sydney Tech or Sydney Boys'. Whereas they might be a similar peer group, in terms of academic standards, our average class would be a mixture. But there would still be enough, within those thirty boys, of academically gifted boys, to challenge any one individual that was academically gifted. (School 4, 2004)

Another principal asserts that her school's official status is defined as much by its academic standing as by its gender exclusivity.

Our profile with the Department of Education is largely a result of our academic results. In that sense, we have our own separate identity as, I believe, it might have been for nearly ten

years now ... we've been the highest-performing comprehensive girls' school in NSW. (School 3, 2004)

Some researchers have focused on the process by which boys replaced girls as the educationally disadvantaged subject (Hayes, 1998; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1997; Connell, 1995). Hayes (1998, p.6) claims that at the time of this shift, 'in the early 1990s, there was limited evidence to suggest that the previous reform agenda (aimed at improving girls' educational outcomes) had been achieved or exhausted'. However, the displacement of girls by boys in the disadvantage discourse, means that 'a new construction of girls as high achieving active participants in education may be of benefit to girls (p.8)' and is likely to be more appealing to those females who do not wish to be seen as disadvantaged. On the basis of the data collected for Table 6.3, as well as the evidence from principals, it possible to conclude that the language used to market some all-girls' schools has moved the discourse from one of disadvantage to one of potential. The message for consumers is that academic excellence, self-confidence and other positive outcomes are equally possible, and perhaps enhanced, in the absence of boys.

According to Ball and Gewirtz (1997, p.211), there are 'key aspects of the semiology of girls' schooling' that reassure parents and have become a deliberate feature of marketing strategies. In the New South Wales context, the schools are officially comprehensive but demonstrably selective by sex. They are obliged to create their 'specialness' in a climate dominated by the choice discourse. Taylor and Woollard (2003) maintain that admission to an all-girls' institution, especially one outside the students' normal drawing area, reflects notions of selectivity that hold considerable appeal for consumers.

It's really enforced on them that...they are special. I mean, they tell them they're special. Not than anyone else is worse, but that they're special. That they're going to succeed, they will succeed, they can succeed ...We will help you succeed. (2003, p.624)

This was supported by the principal of a girls' school that is in high demand.

[There is] an expectation that girls will achieve to their full potential. We really emphasise that. I have heard many of the staff say that to the students – 'You can do it. You can

achieve.’ I am confirming that maybe if they choose to come here, that is what they believe, that they can achieve well. (School 5, 2005)

The principals interviewed for this study argue that separation of the sexes at school gives some students the physical and psychological time and space to develop their self-esteem and skills in ways that the coeducational environment does not permit. This suggests that the single-sex schools construct their appeal in part on the assumption that the coeducational climate represents additional complications during the complex adolescent years, and that some boys and some girls benefit from segregated schooling. This challenges the longstanding advocacy of coeducation as a ‘normal’ environment but, as has already been mentioned, is a notion that attracts increasing support. After comparing studies of mixed and single-sex schools in Europe, the United States and Australia, for example, Riordan (2002, p.18) concluded that single-sex schools ‘provide more successful same-sex teacher and student role models, more leadership opportunities, greater order and discipline, [and] fewer social distractions to academic matters ...’ Based on the data collected for Table 6.3, it would appear that in excluding students of the opposite sex, except in circumstances that are planned to enhance some school activity, the single-sex schools represent themselves as being able to create a uniquely effective climate.

The notion of reduced distraction is cited by two principals as a positive outcome of gender segregation, perceived by parents as contributing to their children’s academic success. One boys’ school draws attention to this in its marketing materials, reflecting the principal’s view that,

Certainly, there’s going to be a perception that it’s less complicated, perhaps, going to a school where there aren’t girls. I mean, some parents will hold that view even though society’s boys and girls are integrated totally. There would be some parents that think, look, you know, my son is going to be better off. You know, they can mix with the girls on the weekend or through friends of friends, but in terms of their education, I think they might be better off without the distraction of girls ... I think also that with the girls’ education strategy and through the HSC and publicity with respect to reading and all those sorts of things, and the perception of the boys being the lesser cousins of the girls academically, that’s another facet of why they might send their sons to [single-sex school]. (School 2, 2004)

This study places a strong emphasis on the marketing strategies employed by some schools, particularly in terms of the link between academic achievement and the single-sex environment. This is most pronounced among the girls' schools, as shown in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 reveals that three times as many girls' schools as boys' schools referred to a tradition of academic excellence. These claims were frequently reinforced by references to consistently high results in the Higher School Certificate (a matter of public record) and official recognition through Director-General's and Premier's Awards. It is notable that the academic focus is frequently linked with the creation of independent, self-confident female leaders, and together these attributes were presented as essential to prepare students for their post-school lives. Many more girls' schools than boys' schools nominate particular student attributes that they claimed to be able to develop, as seen in these examples.

[Girls'] High School is a comprehensive school with an emphasis on educating girls to be knowledgeable, responsible and confident members of society.

*

As a learning community that sets high standards, we seek to provide each girl with the skills and understandings that will enable her to achieve her potential and fulfill her role as an independent member of the community.

*

We develop young women who can deal confidently with change and who will carry with them through life the ability to learn and achieve personal success.

*

We want each girl to be an independent life long learner who will be able to make a strong contribution to our community through employment and participation as an effective citizen.

*

The school is committed to developing young women who are independent learners and leaders, able to work cooperatively as future citizens.

These descriptions, taken from the DET website, provide evidence of marked differences in the way the girls' schools represented what they had to offer, over and above the academic and extra-curricular programs. As mentioned earlier, the girls' schools appear to see their role as one of building on assumptions of academic success

and focusing on the additional personal skills that are needed in the post-school world. In contrast, the all-boys' alternatives portray themselves as placing a special focus on their students' emotional and behavioural development as well as their academic skills.

I would say that in things like leadership, self-confidence, resilience, ability to work with others – so I am in an area that I would call competencies and life skills before I even start talking about standard academic matters – there are differences there, I would argue.

For example, we would struggle in my previous co-ed school to have boys put their hands up for things. In our SRC of twenty people, in one year it was twenty girls. Now that is just absurd. We would call for nominations and vote on school captains and vice-captains and every one of them would be a girl.

So there is an issue there that I would acknowledge in terms of leadership, self-confidence, motivation, drive, whatever. (School 5, 2005)

Another principal claims that boys' schools have a special capacity to support the development of masculine identity and that he promotes this whenever possible.

Very often, if we go up against a co-educational school in that mock trial, nearly all the participants in that co-educational team are girls. Because girls speak better, they argue better, they debate better, and they are better at mock trials. We're going up against [co-ed selective school] on Friday of this week in the mock trial team - and I bet most of those participants are going to be girls; they're not going to be boys. But the opportunities that we give to the boys here, because of the nature of the school, all go to boys. The whole team will be boys. So there's one of the strongest reasons to send your son to a boys' school if you're wanting him to have an opportunity to participate in those things and not be edged out by the girls. So that's an argument that I've put there. (School 1, 2004)

From both school types therefore, the message for consumers is that academic excellence, significant personal development and other desirable outcomes are equally possible, and perhaps enhanced, in institutions where students of the other sex are not present.

6.7 Discussion

This study has cited Salomone (2003) to argue that the appeal of the contemporary single-sex schools lies at least part in their reinvention as second-generation schools. That is, while retaining the practice of gender selectivity, they offer a comprehensive curriculum that is indistinguishable from that of their peers, within a public education system that is committed to equity for all students. However, their unique status now enables them to claim a renewed capacity to meet the needs of boys or girls in ways that the coeducational alternatives cannot.

This chapter has relied heavily on the experience of school principals to explain the contemporary circumstances of the single-sex comprehensive schools, the most extensive subset of the single-sex provision. The principals have testified to their schools' increasing requirement to position themselves effectively in a highly competitive education market, where consumer perceptions frequently place the comprehensive schools on the lowest tier of an unofficial schools hierarchy that includes both government and non-government alternatives.

This study contends that the current competitive education market demands that principals and schools find ways of making their schools 'special'. In their practice of gender segregation, the single-sex schools have a unique distinguishing feature which some now consciously appropriate in their publicity. In some schools' advertising material this feature is now presented as adding value to the overall educational experience, on the basis that students can pursue their interests and develop their skills more effectively in the absence of the other sex. However, it is difficult for consumers to test such claims, particularly when these are made on a school-by-school basis and are not articulated by the system to which they belong.

In the next chapter it will be seen that it is possible to further sub-divide the group of single-sex comprehensive schools. As already mentioned, there is evidence of some residualisation of schools in the public system as some institutions become increasingly vulnerable to socio-economic and demographic pressures, manifested in a competitive education market by the tendency for students to travel to schools outside their immediate drawing area. In the following chapter it will be seen that the 'neighbourhood comprehensive' model holds a special appeal in those areas where

its single-sex variant has adapted to suit the circumstances of particular communities. In the current context, it is arguable that these schools are increasingly reminiscent of the original intentions of the Wyndham Scheme.

7 The single-sex Arabic-speaking Muslim schools

No one has put pressure on me. But I'll tell you the truth. I think there is an Arabic-proof fence and I think there are a lot of people in the community who would rather see these kids in one place than in other schools, because of their perceptions of what Arabic-speaking boys are like. (School 7, 2004)

7.1 Introduction

Earlier chapters have shown that the single-sex public school provision in New South Wales, comprising forty-six discrete campuses, includes a large group of comprehensive schools (37) and a small group of academically selective institutions (9). In the preceding chapter the sub-group of single-sex comprehensives was discussed in relation to the notion of a hierarchy of schools, with all principals in this study acknowledging the pressures of a highly competitive education market. The evidence provided by a range of informants, supported by enrolment statistics, suggests that many consumers consider the coeducational comprehensive school to have the lowest status in this hierarchy. The previous chapter also examined the semiology employed by some single-sex comprehensive schools to claim a distinctive capacity to meet the needs of male or female students, as part of their attempt to establish a niche in the market. In so doing, the principals and their schools appear to point to a 'special something' that can only be delivered via a single-sex environment.

Many of the single-sex comprehensive variants are in high demand. It is relevant, therefore, to consider the extent to which a consumer-oriented education market – that is, one characterised by choice and diversity – may highlight, and even exacerbate, the success of some schools and the disadvantaged status of others.

This study's investigation of the contemporary single-sex public high schools suggests that in New South Wales there is an additional dimension to the provision wherein the geographic clustering of some ethnic groups has resulted in schools with a visibly monocultural, rather than multicultural, student population. This cluster of schools draws predominantly from Arabic-speaking, Muslim communities. In demographic terms, these schools differ in part from their over-subscribed single-sex comprehensive peers in that their appeal is strongest in their local area. Many are, or have been, officially differentiated from other public schools by their designation as

disadvantaged schools¹, a process that is ‘underpinned by principles of equity and social justice in education.’² This chapter draws on a range of oral and written sources to examine the nature and role of these schools and, as mentioned in Chapter 6, two single-sex comprehensive schools from the sample of seven provide local data. One is a boys’ school and one is a girls’ school. Both are located in the South-Western region and they replicate the enrolment patterns identified in Chapter 6, in that the boys’ school has far fewer students than its female counterpart.

For the purposes of this thesis, references to these schools and their students will normally include the acronym ASM, representing the words ‘Arabic-speaking Muslim’. The nomenclature of the ASM subset has been chosen for two reasons. It is an accurate and unambiguous depiction of the dominant demographic characteristics of these schools. It is also the description used by many who work and study within such institutions, including office staff, students and teachers, who use this and similar terms to describe the schools and their communities.

During the data collection process, I became aware of the fact that the schools make it clear to prospective parents that their community comes in the main from Arabic-speaking and/or Muslim backgrounds. In telephone conversations and other responses to queries about the schools, this was presented as a polite statement of fact, delivered along the lines of ‘Did you realise that our school reflects its neighbourhood and is mainly Arabic-speaking and Muslim?’ This was clearly intended to provide information about the distinctive socio-linguistic and socio-cultural nature of these schools, and should not be interpreted in any way as a pejorative comment.

¹ Some schools refer to their official designation as disadvantaged schools on their websites. Some refer to a future date by which they will no longer be designated as disadvantaged. A complete list of disadvantaged schools is available at www.psp.nsw.edu.au/about/Updated06Listper cent20ofper cent20schoolsper cent20PSFP05-08.pdf

² Extract from the same website.

7.2 Single-sex education for disadvantaged students

It was not the original intention of this study to identify disadvantaged schools in the wider single-sex provision. The findings that underpin the work of this chapter were an unanticipated outcome of the interviews with principals and other informants. It is important to note, however, that the identification of this further subset of single-sex comprehensive schools coincided with an invitation to speak at a conference hosted by the National Association of Single-Sex Public Education (NASSPE) in the United States in October 2005.³ An overarching theme of the conference, expressed in a dozen or more presentations, was the perceived benefit that single-sex schools can bring to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to the keynote speaker, this is particularly true for boys (Wright 2005). In contrast to New South Wales, where the single-sex public school option is both more prevalent and more diverse, the value of this model for disadvantaged and minority groups is a key premise of the current advocacy for single-sex education in America, where the coeducational, comprehensive model has dominated since the introduction of mass schooling in the early twentieth century.

Motivated in part by a concern that Americans take coeducation for granted, and that the burden of proof regarding school effectiveness has recently applied much more strongly to single-sex alternatives, Riordan (2002) has urged a greater consideration of single-sex private schools to assess the implications for the public sector.

The research is ‘exceedingly persuasive’ in demonstrating that single-sex schools are effective in terms of providing both greater equality and greater achievement, especially for low-income and working-class students, most particularly for African-American and Hispanic-American boys and girls ... (p.13).

I draw on Riordan (2002) in this chapter because of his assertion that single-sex schooling (excluding the provision of single-sex classes in a coeducational environment) offers the greatest benefits to disadvantaged students, both male and female. As a result of his assessment of the international research, he concludes that single-sex schools ‘provide a set of structural norms conducive to academic learning’

³ ‘Best Practices for Single-Sex Education’, Second Biennial Conference, Covington, Kentucky, USA, October 8-10 2005

(p.20). These norms, he maintains, include 'more successful same-sex teacher and student role models, more leadership opportunities, greater order and discipline, fewer social distractions to academic matters, and the choice of a single-sex school is a proacademic choice. (p.18)' A key premise of Riordan's work is his conclusion that the historical disadvantage [differentiated curriculum] for girls (see Chapters 3 and 4 of this study) was remediated by the last decade of the twentieth century, with the result that 'only females of low socioeconomic status are likely to show significant gains (along with boys) in single-sex schools' (p.16).

7.3 Identifying the disadvantaged ASM schools

While considerable information about Non-English Speaking Background students is available to consumers, the official data published by New South Wales education authorities do not permit a breakdown of individual school populations by national or racial heritage, religious adherence or socioeconomic status. Nor is it possible to measure the academic performance of students belonging to particular ethnic groups. Therefore, the identification of ASM schools and the assessment of their students' academic achievement therefore depended on Census data, the DET Directory's enrolment statistics, annual reports from schools, and the testimony of principals and other informants.

Nine of the nineteen single-sex schools in the South-Western and Western regions were identified as drawing at least one-third of their enrolment from ASM communities. Several had a proportion greater than 80 per cent. The number of such schools may be higher but several declined to provide any details other than the overall percentage of Non-English Speaking Background students. School populations characterised by disadvantage were mentioned by a former Minister for Education when he announced additional financial support.

Besides recognising schools in electorates in Sydney's west and south-west as among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in the State, a large number of schools in rural electorates will benefit from the disadvantaged schools program. (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1996)

The location and distribution of single-sex schools in the Western and South-Western regions must also be considered in any examination of the relationship between the schools and their populations. Table 7.1 shows all of the single-sex schools in the two regions, by establishment date (in chronological order from earliest to most recent), and the original purpose for which they were built. It should also be noted that none of the single-sex schools in these areas is academically selective.

Table 7.1 also shows the schools that attract an income from the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) which is designed ‘to reduce the achievement gap for students in schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds’ (NSW DET 2005 Directory, p.52).⁴ Of these, a further three all-boys’ ASM schools receive funding under the Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) ‘in recognition of their deep needs’ (NSW DET PSFP, 2005, p.1). According to the principal of one boys’ school included in this study, his is ‘the poorest community as a high school in New South Wales’ (School 7, 2004).

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, each public education region is divided into School Education Groups (SEGs)⁵. These are administrative divisions led by SEG Directors, who have direct responsibility for supporting the operations of all government schools in their areas. According to the Director of Bankstown SEG, who is also a former principal, the key factors considered by the education authorities when allocating schools to SEGs are the jurisdictions of local councils, the nature and extent of their links with schools, including financial support, and the total educational provision? Commonwealth and State electorates are also taken into account (Interview, Leonarder, 2004). Table 7.1 also indicates the relationship between the single-sex schools and their SEGs in the Western and South-Western regions.

⁴ Schools are added to and removed from the list as their communities’ needs are determined and addressed.

⁵ See Table 5.1, Chapter 5.

See print copy for table 7.1

Given the high proportion of schools that are both single-sex and classified as disadvantaged in the South-Western Sydney region, it is interesting to note the message posted on the Department of Education and Training's website.

The South-Western Sydney Region of schools incorporates 274 schools catering for the varying needs of almost 130,000 students. The Region's work is focused on the celebration of public education. We are highly responsive to our local communities.⁶

⁶ (www.schools.nsw.edu.au/regions/sthwest_sydney/index.php retrieved on 11 December 2007)

7.3.1 Origins and characteristics of the disadvantaged ASM school populations

Consideration of immigration patterns and census data provides evidence of a correlation between the disadvantaged status of some of the ASM schools and the recent history of their communities. Distinguishing between the first (1880-1947) and second phases (1947-1975) of Lebanese immigration to Australia, and the post-Lebanese civil war phase (1975-) Suliman (2001, p.7) points to the different settlement trends and social arrangements that can be seen in 'old' (pre-1975) and 'new' (post-1975) Lebanese communities. The early immigrants, predominantly Maronite and Melkite Catholics and Orthodox Christians, gradually dispersed throughout Australian society, including regional areas, establishing small businesses and retail outlets.

Of the Lebanese people who have immigrated to Australia since 1975, over 75 per cent have chosen to live in Sydney. About 30 per cent of these identify as Muslims and about 60 per cent as Christians (Collins et al, 2000). In Sydney, the majority of Lebanese, Turkish, Egyptian and other Middle Eastern Muslims live in suburbs located to the southwest and west of the central business district. According to the staff of the two sample ASM schools, it is possible to make a rough generalisation about three groups of Muslim students are represented in schools in the inner west, the southwest and the south of Sydney. These are students of Turkish origin, Sunni Muslims (many from Tripoli and northern Lebanon) and the Shi'ite Muslims from southern and eastern Lebanon, respectively. However, their distribution varies considerably across the region and it is not appropriate to attempt any particular geographical splitting along religious lines (Suliman, 2001; Omar & Kristy, 1996; Humphrey, 1982). Similarly, Burnley (1982, p.130) found that 'there were several separate village-religious concentrations rather than any one monolithic Lebanese quarter' and in each of these concentrations there remained a high proportion of Australian-born (at least 20 per cent) and other immigrant people.

Muslim residents in a number of these areas are more likely to be unemployed and 'are, on average, economically disadvantaged relative to other Australians' (HREOC, 2004, p.26). According to the 2001 Census, 43 per cent of Australian Muslims have a weekly income of less than \$200. The Muslim population of the south-western

suburbs of Sydney is characterised by high rates of unemployment and generally low socio-economic status. Suliman (2001, p.8) claims that '[m]any of these arrivals had disrupted education and work experience prior to immigration, due to the civil war situation, and had little economic security and limited literacy ability in Arabic.'

The 2001 Census found that approximately two-thirds of Australian Muslims were born overseas, with 20 per cent originating in the Middle East or other Arab countries. This group comprises migrants from Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Syria, in order of numbers, while the majority of Australia's Muslims come from Asia, Africa and Europe. Approximately 55 per cent of Lebanese-born Australians and 84 per cent of Egyptian-born Australians are Christian. The 2001 Census reported nearly 300,000 Muslims living in Australia, with 50 per cent of these in New South Wales, 33 per cent in Victoria and the remainder spread through Western Australia (7 per cent), Queensland (5 per cent), South Australia (3 per cent) and the ACT (1 per cent).

A report from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission noted that 'Muslim Australians are more likely than other Australians to work in blue-collar occupations such as production and transport workers or labourers than as managers, administrators or professionals, even though they have a very similar educational profile to other Australians' (HREOC, 2004, p.26). Approximately 13 per cent of people in both groups hold an undergraduate degree, although fewer Arab Australians (15 per cent) hold a diploma, certificate or other post-Year 12 trade qualification when compared with all Australians, where the figure is 22 per cent. There is a significant difference between the proportion of Arab Australians who have never attended school (8 per cent) compared to the total number of Australians who have never attended school (1 per cent).

The cluster of Arabic-speaking Muslim schools is a New South Wales public education phenomenon that reflects their communities' post-1975 immigration trends. According to Suliman (2001), whose research focused on the educational outcomes of Lebanese-background students in secondary schools in south-western Sydney, it is possible to generalise about the religious affiliation of school populations. She says that 'students in a Catholic school would come mainly from a Catholic background [Lebanese churches], whereas in state schools most Lebanese students are Muslim'

(p.30). In the opinion of a former principal and serving bureaucrat, the single-sex schools in the Bankstown and Granville School Education Groups have retained their gender-separate status because of NSW policymakers' awareness of some Muslim communities' preference for single-sex education (Interview, Leonarder, 2004). In these SEGs, the substantial majority of ASM enrolments are students from families who name Lebanon as their country of origin. In Bankstown, this accounts for 13.7 per cent of the total population (2001 Census).

The schools most favoured by these post-1975 settlers are located in SEGs that report the lowest median weekly incomes and the lowest median weekly rental costs in the Sydney metropolitan area (ABS 2001). A higher number of families receive social security benefits in comparison to all other Sydney regions except for the outer west. The schools are mainly located in what Burnley (1984, p.123) describes as 'new, predominantly Muslim cluster[s] in...Sydney's middle ring suburbs'. According to the principal of one girls' comprehensive school, 'the housing in this area is traditionally at the cheaper end of the market' (School 9, 2004). The distinctive settlement patterns of more recent immigrants, largely driven by economic necessity, have been observed by that school's senior staff over a long period.

T2: ... you have to look at the demographics of this area. We are the cheapest accommodation you can get close to Sydney, basically, in all the flats around here. A fellow who was here used to say, 'We are always going to get a lot of the first phases through, the people who come here. That is why we have a smattering of Africans because they can fit five, six or seven people in a flat and it's about the cheapest accommodation you can get. We have always had that population running through the school. They come here because it is the first place they settle. Some of the Islanders have come, settled into cheap rental accommodation and then they get something in Campbelltown and they're moving out to that area. So in a way we're almost a transient school, except for those core Arabic-speaking students.

T3: Yes. And because there is a mosque here, there will always be Arabic people. They will be drawn to the mosque. Whereas the Islanders are Christian and there is a variety of Christian churches – they are more interspersed, but they are predominantly out Campbelltown way. (School 9, 2004)

The schools discussed in this chapter are notable for a level of ethnic clustering that does not reflect settlement patterns in the wider community. For example, an analysis from the Brisbane Institute points out that ‘Lakemba⁷ is the most cosmopolitan area in Sydney’s south-west. Ethnically, 129 nationalities including Africans, Greeks, Italians, Pacific Islanders, Lebanese, Vietnamese and Koreans, together with white Australians, live in this region’ (Kabir & Moore, 2003, p.3).⁸ Notably, the schools under discussion in this chapter are classified as ASM because their populations do not reflect this diversity. That is, the Muslim families in these areas demonstrate a preference for single-sex schools that is not reflected in the educational choices made by other national groups, whose children are enrolled at other public schools (including coeducational and selective) or attend non-government schools. However, Donohue Clyne’s (2002) study found significant diversity of opinion across Australian Muslim communities, particularly with regard to issues such as single-sex environments, discipline, music and sex education. That investigation, which employed focus groups of Muslim parents with children enrolled at both public and Islamic schools, also found that despite concerns expressed about levels of participation and achievement among ASM students, very few studies had ‘specifically examined Muslim parents’ expectation and beliefs about the education of their children’ (2002, p.311). Additionally, whereas Donohue Clyne’s own studies (2000, 2001) found single-sex education to be a low priority among Muslim parents in Australia, she also cites Abdel-Halim’s (1989) conclusion that single-sex (especially all-girls’) schools are very important to these communities. The principal of a coeducational school⁹ drawing from the same areas as the most disadvantaged single-sex ASM schools believes that many Muslim parents have a preference for single-sex schools, particularly for girls in the post-pubertal years.

Why do some parents from ASM communities opt for single-sex and some for coeducational schools?

⁷ This suburb is located in Sydney’s south-western suburbs, 15 kilometres from the central business district. The mosque is one of the best-known in Australia and is administered by the Lebanese Muslim Association.

⁸ Lakemba Public School, a primary school, is a member of the Strathfield School Education Group. There are five single-sex schools in this SEG, of which four can be considered ASM schools on the basis of their enrolments.

⁹ This informant was a colleague of mine in another organisation and, because of her own heritage and understanding of the communities involved in this study, was a logical source of information. I thank her for her willingness to provide another perspective.

It's about habit and convenience. They want to send them to school in their communities and near to home. If there were more single-sex schools they would send them there. There aren't enough. Some parents are more liberal and don't mind the coeducational structure but some are much more traditional. (Mobayed, S., personal communication, 8 March 2006)

The principal of a selective girls' school located in another part of Sydney claims that this is a key aspect of the support for the schools.

If you take a look at [girls' comprehensive] ... if they made that co-ed, they'd lose their entire female population because they're all Muslim girls, and the parents want single-sex schooling. They don't want girls having contact with boys, and they think that they're safe from the hours of 9 to 3 in that school. So it would spell the death of those schools rather than anything else.

And presumably the principal at a school like that is advising the DET constantly of that reality.

Yes, hopefully. I mean, [another girls' comprehensive] has got quite a large Arabic population too, I believe, and the Muslim parents want single-sex schooling for their daughters. (School 8, 2004)

This perspective is reinforced by a parent who led the Parents and Citizens' Associations at School 9 as well as an all-boys' ASM school.

And the parents who have their children at the two schools prefer single-sex schools for their children?

Oh, yes.

Why is that?

Ah ... I prefer single-sex schools because ... it's not because of the religious only ... it's because of the freedom. The girls feel much more free to do anything she likes: not anybody's watching her and picking on her.

Most parents you know would feel the same way?

Oh yes. Yes. Even the parents come and ask me, 'What's your opinion?' I say, 'If you want to send them to a co-ed school, it's up to you. But I prefer that.' They say, 'Because you prefer that, we're going to send them to a single-sex school.' I say,

‘This is my opinion, this is why, blah blah blah. This is why I like it.’ They say, ‘OK, maybe it does ... maybe it applies to us too.’ So they just send their daughters the same. (P&C President, School 9, 2004)

It is arguable that the high proportion of all-boys’ and all-girls’ schools in this area of New South Wales is evidence of an administrative accommodation of the preferences of particular communities. That is, they reflect the government system’s capacity and willingness to provide a ‘special something’ for these students and their families.

7.4 Evolution of the ASM schools

As was demonstrated in Table 7.1, the majority of the ASM schools were established to cater for the Sydney’s expanding population in the middle of last century.

According to the principal of School 7, ‘This school had 1200 kids in it in the ‘70s and ‘80s.’ The school’s enrolments are now well below capacity. It competes for students with other comprehensive schools as well as selective public high schools and a wide range of non-government schools. The principal says that the school’s enrolment patterns over time reflect distinct demographic changes in the local community.

You said before that the single-sex nature of the school is important to the community.

It is, yes.

Is that why the school was established in the first place?

Oh, no. That’s fifty years ago and that was just what happened then. This was an Anglo-Greek school in the seventies, and in the fifties, of course, it was an Anglo school. I was brought up in this area and I didn’t go to school here, but this was a working class Anglo area with mainly immigrants of Scottish/Irish background. So it is far different from what it was then. (School 7, 2004)

Data from key informants, together with school records, indicate that some single-sex comprehensive schools in Sydney’s southern and western suburbs have experienced similar socio-cultural shifts to those observed in both American and British inner urban public schools. This may also be true of other comprehensive schools in the New South Wales public system, but in this study the emphasis is on institutions that,

in the words of one American researcher, have ‘weathered ... dramatic demographic and social changes [and] have undergone transformations in their student bodies from white merchant class to a racially and ethnically diverse and increasingly poor population’ (Salomone, 2003, p.8).

The socio-cultural shifts described earlier have had a profound effect on some schools, as witnessed by three senior members of staff at School 9.

T1: I’ve actually been here since ... since ’75, I think it was.

OK. So what kind of school was it then?

T1: In ’75, it was Anglo-Saxon, mainly Anglo Saxon. Then in the 1980s it became predominantly second-generation Greeks, and then in the nineties, Arabic-speaking.

And it has always been a single-sex school?

T1: It has always been a single-sex school.

Were there any challenges during that period, the thirty years that you’ve known it, to the single-sex status of the school?

T1: Not that I can think of, no. No. It actually thrived up until the nineties ... mid-nineties.

T2: Mid-nineties, I think. I came here in 1988, and there were about 1200 girls.

T1: Yes. In the early stages, we had 1200 kids. We had portables all over the place.

T2: I started off at [boys’ comprehensive] and that was when the first Lebanese refugees started to come to Australia, in the late 70s, so it was starting in the late 70s.

T3: I think it started to change in the early 90s.

T1: The 80s here were good. I can remember them.

T3: When I first came in 1985, we were thirty per cent Greek and 30 per cent Arabic and they were a mixture of Muslim and Christian.

T1: That’s right.

T3: So in the Muslim and Christian group you actually had two cultures.

T2: I think the first wave were Christian Lebanese, weren't they?

T3: Yes, and we had the mixture there. We had thirty per cent Greek, we had close to twenty per cent Asian, and the rest were a mixture.

T1: It was 1990, or 1991 that I can remember when the first Year 7 intake was all Arabic girls. There were no Greeks and maybe just a couple of Anglos.

T3: Yes, I think probably the late 80s was getting toward the end of the mix. That is why we are a different school.

T1: That's our saving grace now but back in the 70s and 80s, it was different, wasn't it? It was more about women's education and trying to empower women.

T3: But we've had not only a change to [Muslim non-government school], but also [private school]. That drew our Christian Arabs there so we lost our Christian Lebanese Arabic-speaking girls and then we have lost the religious and probably a little bit more affluent students to [Muslim non-government school] and to several schools around the area, very small schools. So basically we are left with the lower-income Muslim Arabic girls, and that is the culture change. (School 9, 2004)

Links can be made between the increase in both government and non-government Muslim schools and the post-1975 wave of immigration from Lebanon. The increasing Commonwealth and State focus on equity and the education of girls was accompanied by the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation and the rise of organisations reflecting a range of societal issues, including multiculturalism and feminism. There is evidence of some conflict between the commitment to the provision of comprehensive education and the complexities of serving diverse communities. According to a former regional director, the challenge lay in delivering an equitable outcome to both sexes because of the conflict between meeting the socio-cultural needs of immigrants and the education authorities' commitment to introducing the comprehensive, coeducational model.

Can you describe the attitudes of the school communities you looked after during the late 70s and early 80s?

In South-Western Sydney region we had many newly arrived migrants and refugees. The cultures from which many of them came were outraged by the notion that boys and girls be educated together beyond the primary school years. I refer to the strong Catholic communities of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea as well as those from Chile, Argentina and Peru.

The Islamic communities which concentrated in that region were also extremely opposed to the practice. Indeed, many of the Muslim fathers did not hold with the education of girls beyond primary school. Each year we had a struggle to establish that girls could not leave schools or be retained in primary school once their primary schooling was completed. To have provided only coeducational classes in secondary school would have guaranteed the disappearance of Muslim girls before they had attained the basic standards necessary to survive in our country.

The large Buddhist community there was equally resistant to the change.

You must have had some very complex dealings with those communities?

There were other less attractive reasons for my objections. In those schools where they had predominantly Lebanese boys, their chauvinistic attitudes to women, even teachers and school counsellors, were causing great disruption. I contacted the Imam of the mosque and the leader of the Maronite [Christian] church and called on their help to control and instruct their own communities on acceptable behaviour. To have sent girls into a school where boys already established that culture would have been a disaster and sent them into retreat in learning.

What did you do to resist the introduction of coeducation in your schools?

I therefore argued, on the basis of standing government policy set out in documents on multicultural policy, that we were obliged to respect ethnic and cultural differences and to provide schools that accorded with their cultural standards. I then argued that on the basis of social equity as set out in Equal Opportunity policies and Anti-Discrimination laws we should guarantee the same choice for Australian and European citizens as for those of other faiths and beliefs. The schools were allowed to continue as separate schools. (Interview, Guthrie, 2004)

According to one regional director and former principal, who has responsibility for many primary and secondary ASM schools, it is essential to appreciate both historical and contemporary factors in order to understand the evolution of these schools.

Would you say that the families in this area have a preference for single-sex schools? Is that a reason for the existence of so many of these schools?

There is definitely a preference by a number of families, by particular cultural groups, for their girls and their boys to be educated in single-sex schools. I think there is a lesser preference in some families for the boys to be educated in single-sex schools. Some of the older areas near the railways lines tend to see a preference for single-sex but the newer areas where co-ed schools have been built are doing very well. The single-sex schools go back quite a long time, up to 60 and 70s years whereas Condell Park is only 40 years.

We had the situation in Narwee, which converted from a single-sex boys' school that was the partner to Beverly Hills GHS and made the transformation to a co-ed school and failed. The parent community made the decision to close the school in conjunction with the school education group because the cohorts were just too small.

Do any of the single-sex schools in these areas face closure because of falling enrolments, do you think?

No, I don't believe closure is an option. I don't think anybody is in a situation where there could be a closure. I cannot see any community articulating to me that they want a change from a boys' school or a girls' school to a co-ed school. While Bankstown is around 600-630 I can't see any reason why they should be threatened. Wiley Park is not in my area but it would be the same situation there, I would imagine. (Interview, Leonarder, 2005)

Suliman (2001, p.15), referring to non-government options, observes that 'Lebanese schools and educational institutions were established to cater for the educational needs of students coming from an Arabic-speaking background, and this was within a Lebanese cultural and religious environment.' It is arguable that the single-sex public schools in the same areas have been transformed into a non-fee paying variant of these private schools over a similar period. The expressed preference of the Muslim-majority communities made it possible to justify the retention of single-sex schools in these areas on the grounds that this acknowledged the distinctive character

of their drawing zones and enabled the delivery of comprehensive education within a culturally appropriate educational environment.

7.5 Political concessions to socio-cultural shifts

There is evidence of tension between the commitment to the establishment of comprehensive, coeducational institutions during the 1970s and 1980s and the accompanying development of a multicultural agenda that ensured that the educational preferences of particular communities would be respected. A former NSW Director-General of Education describes the policy climate of the era.

It [the implementation of coeducation in public schools] was all because the government policy was there, that in fact we had to proceed with it against a lot of other impediments. You've got to understand that the Ethnic Affairs Commission came into being at that time, and of course it had views about respecting the cultural values, and we were not going to take them on, in a sense, because we were already having enough difficulties with community languages – Modern Greek for the HSC, to take one example.

We were even providing courses for one or two candidates to try to appease the pressure from the Ethnic Affairs Commission through the Senior Board of Studies.

So this issue of single-sex schools, particularly as it applied to Bankstown, Canterbury and those areas, certainly wasn't going to be an issue that would surface, unless it was pushed from somewhere. It did surface because we, Cavalier [Minister for Education 1984-1988] for one, wanted to pursue it. Canterbury was one of his. But I think you'd have to say that there wasn't much heart within the system for taking the fight on [to implement coeducation throughout the public system].

So the politics were such that in those areas the schools were unlikely to be changed ...

Very unlikely.

... because they catered for cultural groups that wanted single-sex education?

You have to look at what was in the background, too. The Schools Commission was funding ethnic schools and the alternative to the government system was to set up your own school, and now the opportunity was there. If you look at what

they did, they've usually gone single-sex. So we were faced with the charge that we were losing government school students and in fact we were unlikely to precipitate some change that would turn them away in droves. (Interview, Swan, 2004)

The way that successive governments' concern about the loss of students to private schools has impacted on single-sex schooling is a central theme of this study. In 2007 the same concerns are being expressed as were apparently behind much of the decision-making in the 1970s and 1980s: how to attract and retain students by making public schools more appealing to their communities.

A consequence of this concern relates to the capacity of a highly differentiated, centrally-organised system to deliver equity across all schools. In the case of the ASM schools, it is arguable that the very appeal they hold for some families may be regarded as unattractive by other sections of the community. If this translates into a reduced capacity to attract a diverse population, and enrolment falls, then it is arguable that differentiation leads to isolation, and even alienation. In the context of this thesis it is pertinent to question why these developments seem to have attracted little official attention. One informant interviewed for this study emphasises the complexities faced by policy makers.

Several principals believe that there has been a sort of ghettoisation [ASM schools] – a decision to build an unofficial fence around that community – an approach that is possible because we can say that we are catering for a particular community.

Yes. They [principals] actually believe that that's a deliberate decision?

Not intentional, but nobody's actually doing anything to ...

I think it's kind of understood but not admitted. I was just questioning the word 'decision.' The only reason I was asking that question and frowning about what you said was because I certainly agree that it has, in a sense, suited everybody to have certain high schools – and it applies to boys as well, but I guess particularly to Muslim girls – it suited everyone to have certain high schools become Muslim high schools. But I am not sure that that would ever have meant keeping a school open deliberately, or not closing it, or not moving towards coed.

Is it something the government would be aware of, do you think?

Look, I think people are aware of it, but they are probably a bit like me and sort of shrug and say, 'What do you do about it?' Because the solutions, if there are solutions, are not educational solutions. I don't think there is any doubt that we live in a far less equal, egalitarian, compassionate society that we did. I mean, there is a bit of a cycle with these things, but the change, however vague, however hard it is to measure ... the change in the kind of society we are and aspire to be, I think means that the educational institutions, to a large extent, reflect all sorts of other things and you can't really change them.

I think over the last few years, Ministers in the Department here have really faced decisions that literally mean 'If we do this, even though we think we should do it for educational reasons, it will cost us the loss of thousands of kids from government schools.' Which is the greater good? It's a horrible choice to be faced with, but I think it becomes hard to apportion blame. (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004)

The impact of a market-driven education context may be most obvious in the case of the disadvantaged ASM schools. The position of these schools is considerably more complex because although they are nominally seen to offer choice in the public provision, their location means they have inherited particular demographic characteristics that simultaneously appeal to and deter sections of the population.

7.6 Marketing challenges for the disadvantaged ASM schools

As already mentioned, all principals of single-sex comprehensive schools interviewed for this study acknowledge the existence of a competitive education market. The principals of some oversubscribed schools express relatively little concern, because of their schools' well-established reputation and positive public image. In contrast, the principals of the ASM schools report particular challenges as they attempt to lessen negative perceptions of their schools, particularly in terms of academic performance (boys' and girls' schools) and students' behaviour (boys' schools). The principal of one girls' comprehensive school explains that,

This school, at the moment, has a bad reputation - always has had - as a rough school. I don't know why, because I think it's

a good school. But you'll find some locals see the school - some of the brighter kids and the Asian kids will look to move out to other schools rather than come here. Possibly it's this connotation that it is an Arabic school, and the bad press that a lot of the Arabs have got over the years.

It's not a positive outlook demographically, then, in terms of bringing into this school more able, more affluent ...

No, that would not be part of the equation for us. We see ourselves as dealing with the local community, and who walks through the door, and maximizing their opportunities. We don't have a big focus on getting this to a school that's going to have the top academic results in the state. We just accept that with the area we're drawing from, that's unlikely. If we get bright kids in, we really work hard to give them the best chance we can, and if they get to be number one that's fantastic - for them and for us. That's a real plus, because it's a role model for the other kids. But realistically, we're never going to compete with schools that draw their kids from a middle to upper-class area (School 9, 2004).

A variety of research indicates that some ASM communities feel unwelcome in mainstream Australian society, mainly because of cultural stereotyping (Harris, 2005a, 2005b; Kabir & Moore, 2003; Poynting et al, 1998, 1999; Ata, 1982). The impact on schools drawing from these communities is significant, and in caring for students the staff attempt to counter such stereotyping. School 7's principal contends that, '[t]here are a lot of myths that have to be overcome to maintain a school in this area at the present time' and stresses that the lack of understanding that the ASM and Anglo communities have about each other relates directly to cultural perceptions that each community holds of the other.

Negative stereotyping of the Arabic-speaking communities generally, and of Lebanese Muslims in particular, has been well documented (Suliman, 2001; Poynting et al, 1999; Kattan, 1998; Hage, 1991). The 1991 Gulf War was the basis for 'open discrimination and attacks on members of the Arab and Muslim community (the Lebanese representing a large percentage of these)' (Suliman, 2001, p.16). A subsequent media focus on ethnic gangs based in the south-western suburbs has added to this (Kabir & Moore, 2003). Some members of the ASM school community argue that the terrorist strikes on New York in September, 2001 and the subsequent war in Iraq have exacerbated the social divisions.

Based on the data collected from principals and other key informants, the challenges faced by these ASM schools appear to exemplify the multiple strains under which the public system currently operates. As single-sex institutions, the ASM schools experience the same lack of philosophical and systemic recognition identified in earlier chapters and have no voice in that regard in the education discourse. As disadvantaged schools, they face particular battles in attracting students from as broad a range of abilities and backgrounds as other more academically successful institutions. In a competitive education market, their human and material resources do not enable them to position themselves as effectively as some of their comprehensive cousins.

7.6.1 The semiology of marketing the disadvantaged ASM schools

In previous chapters it has been established that the single-sex schools present themselves as indistinguishable from their coeducational counterparts in terms of offering a comprehensive curriculum. This is reinforced by the official statements emanating from the Department of Education and Training (see Chapters 5 and 6). In Chapter 6 it was demonstrated that the marketing semiology of many single-sex comprehensive schools reflects contemporary discourses about the special educational needs of boys and girls. In that chapter reference was also made to the ways in which the less academically competitive schools emphasise their capacity to address aspects of personal development and provide gender-specific academic support. As mentioned already, it is my contention that the ‘special something’ offered by the ASM schools is demonstrated by their response to their particular communities, precisely the reason given by Harold Wyndham’s committee for the retention of some single-sex public schools (see Chapter 4). Unlike the semiology of many non-ASM single-sex comprehensive schools, which was examined in the previous chapter, the influence of contemporary discourses relating to the education of girls and boys is not strongly evident in the ASM schools’ electronic presence. Nor do the websites offer details of their responsiveness to their communities. This was revealed by the data collected from informants.

7.6.1.1 The care and safety ethic

In the previous chapter it was seen that contemporary marketing semiology portrays schools as safe, caring places. It was argued that the traditional view of the all-girls' school as a refuge has been superseded by the establishment of second-generation models where females are free to pursue their interests and develop their skills more effectively than might be the case in a coeducational environment. Likewise, many all-boys' schools proclaim their capacity to dedicate all of their resources to meeting the specific needs of male students.

In the case of the disadvantaged ASM schools, there is evidence of an additional dimension to the manifestation of this ethic of care. These schools are distinctive for two reasons: selectivity by gender and a clustering of particular ethnic groups. It is arguable that the socio-cultural characteristics of these schools are both the cause and the effect of an 'ethic of care' within an 'ethic of difference' that is unique to this subset. During the course of this study, interviews with a range of informants, including principals, staff and parent representatives from Sydney's ASM schools revealed aspects of caring not observed in any other single-sex comprehensive schools during this study. That is, the ASM schools present as being particularly responsive to their students' lives and the religious and cultural preferences and practices of the communities from which they draw. Consumer appeal is directly linked to the schools' capacity to adapt to their communities, a role that the neighbourhood comprehensive school was always intended to play (see Chapters 5 and 6). According to senior teachers at one ASM school, the school's culture is overtly responsive to the communities from which it draws.

T2: ... we do cater to them [Muslim students] ... the parents know, for example, if a student says she can't listen to music in Assembly, we will pull them out of Assembly. We let them have prayer rooms and all that sort of thing, so we are very supportive of their culture, I think.

T3: Earlier you [researcher] touched on something about Departmental changes and how the school responds to the needs of the kids. I think we respond to the kids, not to the Department. There are some things that are mandated and we have to do those but we have a lot of discussion around what's happening, when there is a new Minister and they want to implement changes. Well, we don't necessarily change for change's sake, in the sense that if this is the latest, let's jump on it.

T2: But we do very much change to what we think the kids here need. And it has always been a school – in my time anyway – with people who very much care about the kids and what the kids need. And, I mean, we have a school that practically shuts down at Ramadan, which is very unusual for a state school. When they're having their celebrations...I remember someone who said, 'Well, I am doing a test' and it was a matter of asking that teacher 'How would you like to come on Christmas Day and do a test?' So you have to be responsive.

There are things like when you have a last period in a portable classroom, you tailor your lesson for kids that are fasting in the middle of summer and haven't had anything to eat or drink all day. You have to respond like that and say, 'All right, this is the last lesson and we'll do very little and if you feel sick just sit on the step.' You have to do that because you are a human being and I think that we are very aware here of those sorts of things. (School 9, 2004)

This informant's emphasis on the need to meet students' specific, and significant, socio-cultural needs suggests a dilemma that tests the egalitarian ideals of comprehensive schooling. Irving and Barker (2004, p.44) advocate the development of a culturally sensitive educational provision, in which 'embedded dominant western values explicitly encompass[ing] views of individual aspiration, choice, opportunity, and success' are modified to resonate more effectively with communities that emphasise religious and family duties. For example, the staff at one ASM school explain that,

I think we have always been aware of pushing the girls as hard as we think they can be pushed, either academically – if we think they've got it in them to go for it, to university or whatever – and particularly, whilst you've got to understand the cultures, in pointing out that there are other options out there. (School 9, 2004)

In this regard, when ASM school staff, as part of the commitment to care, attempt to present the 'other options out there' to their students – particularly girls – they do so from a policy background that tends to 'present equality in relation to the notion of sameness, with little evidence of differentiation' (Irving & Barker, 2004, p.43). While the students are nominally part of a comprehensive system, they are in an environment characterised by a complex ethic of difference, gender segregation and

ethnic clustering may combine to reduce the impact of messages relating to equitable post-school options.

The staff members insist that they are acutely aware of the complexity of serving communities that have little or no understanding of the socio-economic and political shifts that characterised the critical era in education described in Chapter 4.

So you say that the parents are reasonably aspirational for their children, in a general kind of way ...

T1/T2/T3: Yes, yes.

... but does that actually translate into the idea that their girls have choices in life?

T2: One of the smartest kids we've had in Year 10 is being married next Friday.

T1: Is that right?

T2: She'd have to be one of the smartest kids in Year 10.

T1: But she didn't achieve her potential.

T2: No wonder. She knew she was getting married at 18.

Is that what happens to many of them?

T3: Yes, that's the plan.

T2: With a lot of the Year 12s, by the time they leave here they are engaged or getting married, or a lot of them are married in the mosque which doesn't get registered because you can't legally marry under a certain age.

T1: That's something that has changed too because in the 70s and through the 80s we were empowering the women and the parents wanted them to go out and get a career. They had fought for it and they got it. And now, you're right...in the late 1990s and into the 2000s, it's going back the other way.

T3: I think it is the clientele. Lower SES, poorly educated.

T2: And quite often, their answer is - with a troublesome daughter - they will simply sign her out of school, take her back to Lebanon and find a husband. (School 9, 2004)

The perspective of parents cannot be overlooked in any contemporary examination of the appeal of the single-sex schools. The appeal of the ASM schools was explained by a parent representative of two ASM schools, one of which is in the sample of schools selected for this study.

And the parents who put their boys into the single-sex boys' schools – what are they looking for, from the schools?

They're looking for ... I'd say ... I was looking for my boys to be in their community.

With other Muslim boys?

With their community. Amongst their community. Because my son made it into a Grammar school when he was in Year Six. He was in primary school and he was a genius in English. Actually he did top English in his HSC, and he got 99 per cent in Art, because he's an artist. The teacher said don't knock him back. I said no, I'd never send him to a Grammar school away from his community. Because he grew up in his community, and if I go out of my community, I am like a fish from the water. I can't live away from this community. If I go and live up in (suburb) or (suburb), one day I will have a nervous breakdown. So I said no. Just going out of my country is enough; I don't want to lose confidence again in my life.

And you think that's true for most of the parents?

Oh yes, yes. They look for the highly populated Arabic people so they can get together- they follow the traditions together. If one of them is fasting they're all fasting. Friday, they all do the Friday prayer together on Friday, which is at the school hall.

At [comprehensive girls' school] and [comprehensive boys' school]?

Yes. At every school. Every school here they do the Friday prayer, whether it's boys or girls. I'd say the community - the most important thing for me is for them to be amongst their community. Because in Ramadan my daughter was having lessons in her lunchtime, instead of having her sitting down while other girls are eating, and most of her classmates all were fasting, so they went into the room and they started talking about the followers of the Prophet who are honest and loyal to other people - they used to have the money of other people - so it was just talking about our religion. There is religious talk every day of Ramadan. So where would she get that? In other schools she can't get it. So this is really

important for me and for my kids. Because so many people didn't have that chance when they were young, and they grew up and they're still saying, we miss that a lot. So when I teach the children religion, they take the flyer home, or they take a picture to colour in at home, and what colour that should be - the mother looks at it and says, 'Oh, I missed out on a lot of that. I was born here, and I didn't get the opportunity, because there was not much of Arabic people in her school. So people were deprived from all those opportunities, but now, because their kids have got it, they just tend to thank God for it. They teach them Arabic, they teach them Koran... you know, I've got Arabic school two days after school, and I've got about 115 students for five classes... (P&C President, School 9, 2004)

This parent speaks as the elected representative of parents and has no doubt about the families' entitlement to public schools that meet the needs of their communities, including religious worship. To some extent, then, this may be seen as an example of the government sector providing what these consumers cannot afford to purchase in the private sector. It also suggests that the ASM schools provide a mechanism for parents to gain enough control over educational facilities and resources to enable the retention of socio-cultural practices (including the separation of the sexes) whilst meeting their legal obligations regarding the compulsory years of schooling.

According to senior staff at School 9, the school maintains a difficult philosophical and practical balance.

T2: I think in a school like this – I don't know what would happen – I wouldn't like to work here if it was co-educational in the community we are in, because of the very great differences between the boys and the girls.

T3: And they do have special needs, different needs. We have to be able to cater for those. I think it just wouldn't function. The girls just wouldn't come to school. They wouldn't feel safe.

T2: They wouldn't feel safe and they wouldn't feel comfortable. So for here, it's probably a good thing.

School-based informants point to a distinction between the level of care parents seek for their daughters, which involves constraints on personal liberty, and the relative personal freedom enjoyed by male students. The care needs of the latter are more

frequently associated with behaviour and discipline. Teachers at one ASM school consider there to be significant differences between the expectations and behaviours of boys and girls.

T2: I think many of them are glad to be away from the boys because they come from a culture where the men dominate. Recently, I spoke to the Deputy at [ASM boys' school] who said that it must be the same here as at that school, because they are the same families. I said, 'No, it's totally different. The girls and the boys in the family are treated so differently.'

T3: Quite differently, yes.

T2: I mean, the boy can do whatever he wants to, and the girl has to do what she is told.

T1: We have had interviews with the parents here whose girls have truanted or got themselves into trouble and the parents have been nothing but supportive of any ideas you come up with. A former teacher here, who transferred to [ASM boys' school], said to me, 'You know those parents we used to have up at [ASM girls' school], those same parents with the boys are totally different. They are not sympathetic, they won't support us.'

T2: [Teacher] said the parents come in and they are so aggressive – you wouldn't believe they were the same people, and it is because it's about their boys.

T1: You wouldn't believe it was the same father who was in here earlier about his daughter. (School 9, 2004)

The testimony of the ASM school principals builds on the link made in Chapter 6 between an 'ethic of care' and a greater focus on welfare in the case of boys' schools. According to the principal of the ASM boys' school included in this study, the kind of care needed at these schools must address poor self-esteem and a sense of isolation from mainstream Australian society.

The kids sometimes think I am a bit of a bastard but generally they get to know that you care about them and you want to make a difference. They can see the difference that's happened since I've been here. When I came here they weren't allowed to use the oval to play at lunchtime. As I said before, I was told there were things I couldn't do. I was told I couldn't get the oval to be used in an appropriate way at lunchtime. Well, they treasure it now.

What had they been doing during their free time then?

They'd just played in the playground space and on the basketball courts. If you limit people, you limit their expectations of themselves and what they can achieve. So they are things we have worked at and we have tried to work on raising academic expectations. We didn't play grade sport when I came here. They'd stopped doing that because there had been a number of incidents over the years between various boys' schools and this one. There had been fights. We made it a privilege to be part of representative sport and we continue to do that and the boys are proud of what they can do now. They are proud of the fact that they can go out and compete for themselves and their school. That's changed a lot. (School 7, 2004)

The 'ethic of care' operating within an 'ethic of difference' may also be reflected in the perceptions of the schools as refuges from inter-cultural tensions. Some of these issues can be explained by what Poynting et al (1998, 1999) call a kind of 'protest masculinity', or acting out, on the part of young Muslim men who feel marginalised and stigmatised. Kabir and Moore (2003) note the increasing stereotyping of Australian Muslims (mainly male) over the past decade, especially since the publicised trials of some in Sydney and the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. In their studies of male ASM students in the South-Western region, Poynting et al (1998, 1999) found evidence of intersections between masculinity and ethnicity that led some of these young men to exhibit anti-social behaviour, including vandalism and fighting associated with gang membership. As the principal of School 7 explains,

We struggle with the beliefs and every time there is a shooting, or something goes on in the Punchbowl/Greenacre area, it decimates our character as a school, even though it has had nothing to do with us. So it is very tough. Even the police in Canterbury who came in and worked with our boys last week - and they are Arabic, a couple of them - have a perception which I am trying to dispel, which they dispelled themselves, last week, when they worked with our boys in small vertical groups, looking at our Code of Conduct and their expectations of teachers and of themselves as students. (School 7, 2004)

According to this principal, the problems at ASM boys' schools are 'a sign about a lack of belief and disempowerment'. The onus on the schools, as he sees it, is to

provide a level of care for the students that encompasses the academic, social and personal elements of each student's day-to-day life. On the face of it, this may be no different to the expectations of care at any other public school. However, the provision of this 'ethic of care' within a teaching and learning environment that is acknowledged by school staff to have a significant 'ethic of difference' is presented as a deeply challenging task.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ASM schools place a strong emphasis on gaining the trust of their communities. As a result, a level of intervention in these disadvantaged communities is made possible that reflects the spirit of the official commitment to meeting the needs of individual students. The students' needs are being met under different circumstances from those in any other New South Wales communities and in any other single-sex public schools. For example, the principal of School 9 raises concerns about the social and intellectual isolation of these school communities.

You have been here over a decade now. What takes up most of your time?

A lot of my time is social work. Heaps of it.

And building bridges with the outside community?

Very much so. It probably took me three years to build up trust and acceptance. But the fact that they let me, as a male, drive three of their girls up to Newcastle and back for a day is incredibly significant. They just don't let them out like that. So I think I've got their trust. And that's taken a lot of work – it's pretty important.

Why is it difficult to arrange excursions?

We've got kids and families here who have never left the area. We've taken parents here to town who have never been to town. That's only a few stops along the railway line, but they don't travel like that. Like their weekends ... this is the only school I've ever taught at where the kids are happy to come back to school after the holidays.

I heard that from the teachers.

Oh yes. And it's true, utterly true. They're happy to be at school. This is where they get some freedom, more than

anywhere else. At home they're tied to the house and the family. It's the extended family – they'll visit other families, have a family picnic on the weekend ... but there's none of this take your kids to the Australian Museum, to the Mitchell Library, to the Harbour Bridge or a local park and do [western] cultural things. That doesn't happen.

On the evidence provided by the ASM schools included in this study, these public institutions see their role as establishing connections between Anglo-Saxon and Middle Eastern values, expectations and practices. They have no choice but to acknowledge the highly complex and demanding socio-cultural context of their students' lives.

According to the principal of School 7, '[t]here is certainly a lot of commitment to keeping this place as a quality school from the DET.' In this sense, one reason why these schools endure may be that they are targeted for state and federal funding. As the principal of one boys' school explains,

I use my PSFP allowance to do extension work with the good kids and ESL work in the classroom, because these kids are not functionally literate and they are deficient in experiences of life that other kids have. If you talk about a farm, or say you are doing agricultural economics in Business Studies, they haven't got a clue about irrigation systems or business management of a farm or just the language that you talk when you do those things. I could walk into a class and do that sort of thing with them, even though I am not a Business Studies teacher, and they will say to me, 'How do you know this?' and I say, 'Because I read and I am interested in those sorts of things.' So their life experience is really, really narrow. (School 7, 2004)

One interpretation of this statement is that such schools and their students belong to a part of the public system that must first enable transition into mainstream society, not simply focus on preparation for post-school destinations.

So when I came here we used that extensively to help the kids who didn't seem to have any educational hope. The first time I sent two kids off to tech [vocational training college] they told me I was a fucking bastard.

The students did?

Yes ... and ten weeks later they came back with their butchers' knives and their certificates and they thanked me and the Deputy for what we had done, because now they had apprenticeships.

But they didn't want to go?

They didn't want to go because the kids in these areas, and their parents, are frightened of what's outside what they know. They are more comfortable in this area than they are anywhere else in Australia. We've got kids who've never been to Manly [popular beach located at northern end of Sydney Harbour]. You know, trying to get kids to go on overnight excursions has been a huge issue in terms of turning around notions of where you learn and how you learn. It's all about that cultural change. (School 7, 2004)

The principal of School 9 also refers to the conflict between encouraging all students to take advantage of post-school opportunities and respecting community values and attitudes.

How many, realistically, will go on to tertiary education?

Probably about twenty to twenty-five per cent of our kids get offered places in universities, which is pretty good, considering what we started with. Not all of them take it up. There'd be another group that go to TAFE - so it's better than you would expect, and probably better because it's a girls' school ... whether because of that complacency they still at least get some academic success.

The boys tend to act out a bit more and not focus, so they wouldn't get as many. But they get some ... there's two local boys' schools - [single-sex boys' ASM school] and [single-sex boys' ASM school]. They'll always get some really good kids in each year, as well. But they're drawing from similar sorts of areas as we are.

So a lot of them would be brothers and sisters?

Oh yes, for sure.

Are the parents aspirational?

Sweeping statement: no. There's still that sort of groundswell amongst many of the community, that, you know, all a woman's good for is the kitchen and the bedroom. It's just sad to see, you know. (School 9, 2004)

Similar themes were recently highlighted by studies conducted in both Sydney and Melbourne, when the Victorian Islamic Women's Welfare Council expressed concern about poor retention rates of Muslim girls at some schools.

Our experience has been that Muslim women can almost be divided into two groups. One is high achieving with good education levels, good careers and good participation in the community. And the other drops out of school early and then drops out of their community. There really is this crude division, there is no in between. That's not what you see in other communities. (Harris, 2005, p.11)

Suliman's (2001) study of students' outcomes at ASM schools in South-Western Sydney region found that the parents in families of Lebanese origin have high hopes for their children in terms of academic performance. However, she concludes that,

If Lebanese-background students are not achieving, it is not because Lebanese culture in general does not support or encourage education but perhaps this can be attributed partly to the specific culture of this group of students and their unique experiences and attitudes towards school and education which are a result of their own and their parents' historical, social and immigration experiences (p.187).

Given that the schools tend to draw from communities characterised by higher than average unemployment, lower educational qualifications and workplace skills, social isolation and conservative religious practices, one conclusion may be that the students from these communities face a combination of disadvantages that are not obvious in other New South Wales single-sex high schools and manifest themselves most overtly in poor academic performance. Suliman (2001) maintains, however, that the low achievers are not representative of all Lebanese students either in Australia or in Lebanon. She points to 'a gap between Lebanese-background parents' high aspirations for the educational and career future of their children and the low educational support and encouragement they give their children' (p.207).

Donohoue Clyne (2002, p.316) asserts that 'in Muslim majority countries, parents do not expect to actively participate in their child's school.' In Suliman's (2001, p.211) opinion, Lebanese parents are not accustomed to the role of participant in their children's education but rather than being unwilling, they simply have 'a different concept of what involvement means; it is a result of a lack of communication and

information between the schools and parents.’ Nevertheless, a reluctance to be present physically does not necessarily reflect a lack of parental interest in the children’s everyday activities. It is important to consider that this may be true for parents in other communities, particularly where there are language barriers.

Arabic parents, most parents, don’t want to be involved in the school, but we are trying really hard to get them to have a fundamental understanding of what we are trying to achieve with their boys. So we run these model lessons with the parents and the boys in the classroom together, with my ESL and Learning Difficulties teachers and classroom teachers to show the parents what happens so that they can support their kids at home with homework. All those things are really important. (School 7, 2004)

Likewise, the principal of the boys’ ASM school has had to introduce strategies for advising parents on how to support their children through school:

Do the parents have aspirations for their children post-Year 12?

Oh, yes, definitely. They expect them all to go to university and that is a realisation that we are overcoming.

So you really have to educate the parents alongside the students?

Yes. We do a lot of that, yes. We do a lot of educative stuff, so nearly every meeting [Parents and Citizens] we have someone in to talk about some facet of the real world that can impact on and support the kids. (School 7, 2004)

In the Sydney context, one of the eleven ASM schools in the South-Western and Western regions is repeatedly cited by principals as an example of the capacity of a school to rise out of disadvantage. The principal of a coeducational ASM school refers to its greater socio-cultural mix.

Why does [girls’ ASM school] have such a good name?

They have a very experienced staff, many of whom have been there a long time. It is in a great location, compared to other schools that are in poorer suburbs. It draws from a wide area that includes parts of Sydney with higher socio-economic status and it has a good reputation. (Mobayed, S., personal communication, 8 March 2006)

In the current study, the evidence from principals and enrolment statistics indicates strong support for the single-sex school alternative from a wide range of New South Wales consumers. However, as mentioned already, in the absence of large-scale survey data, it is not possible to determine the precise reasons for consumer choice *for* this model, which is frequently an out-of-area choice, in preference to the neighbourhood comprehensive coeducational school. In addition, it is important to reiterate that the limited availability of many New South Wales single-sex public schools means that some selectivity invariably occurs, which may well be useful in creating an environment with particular structural norms. There is plentiful evidence from principals and other informants that the majority of single-sex schools attract students from the widest possible range of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and that their demand is due in large measure to the students' consistently high results. On the other hand, this study also provides evidence that single-sex schools that draw predominantly from disadvantaged communities are more likely to experience declining enrolments and a lesser capacity to present themselves competitively in the education market.

7.7 Discussion

Drawing on Groundwater-Smith's (2001, p.2) investigation of the marketisation of schools and the response of the New South Wales government in restructuring public education, it is arguable that the disadvantaged ASM schools present 'a classic dilemma, the rights and needs of groups within the society versus the rights and needs of society as a whole.' In line with her studies, I suggest that it is relevant to question who benefits from the social stratification that appears to be one inevitable consequence of a competitive education market. In this chapter, evidence from a range of informants would appear to support her statement that '[s]pecific communities, based in particular racial, ethnic and/or religious practices may wish to claim that there are important benefits to them in maintaining these practices and that this best undertaken through schooling processes' (p.2). However, in citing Cookson (1994), Groundwater-Smith (p.2) emphasises that '[a] concern that has been expressed regarding schools whose clientele base is related to race, ethnicity and/or religion in the United States of America is that they can contribute to greater isolation of specific groups within the broader society.' Of particular significance to this study are her references to British and American education systems where, she

maintains, there is evidence that some schools avoid enrolling students who represent potential challenges to a school's prestige or behaviour code (Boyd et al, 1994) and that others defend the exclusion of students with disabilities or behaviour problems because of perceptions of greater costs (Shanker & Rosenberg, 1992).

Given the finding of the current study that around half of the nineteen single-sex schools in South-Western and Western Sydney may qualify as disadvantaged ASM schools, there is evidence of considerable isolation of particular types of students. Further, this study's informants provide evidence that their schools attract additional financial support because of their designation as disadvantaged communities. As Groundwater-Smith (2002, p.2) summarises, it could therefore be argued that 'the social stratification which results ... can be a significant cost to others and to the society at large'.

Riordan (2002) cites international research to support his contention that single-sex schools improve the achievement of students of lower socio-economic status and disadvantaged students (Mael, 1998; Lee, 1997; Lee & Marks, 1990; Riordan, 1990, 1994a; Lee & Bryk, 1986). As mentioned in earlier sections, some single-sex comprehensive schools that cannot claim consistently high academic achievement have chosen to market themselves on the basis of other special qualities. According to the informants in this study, the disadvantaged ASM schools perceive their challenge to lie specifically in responding appropriately and effectively to their particular communities.

It is possible that many children, especially females, would not even attend school if the environment were not supportive of their socio-cultural practices and traditions. On one hand, in encouraging families to enrol their children, these schools allow education authorities to focus human and physical resources where they are needed. On the other hand, the fact that enrolments appear to be declining in the disadvantaged ASM schools (especially the all-boys' schools) may indicate that they are in a transition period. Similarly, the increase in the number of private alternatives, particularly Muslim schools, could represent a threat to a number of single-sex ASM schools.

8 The single-sex selective schools

It would be a very, very brave government that would touch [selective girls' school]. We represent the very best of the public education system in a narrow perspective. (Principal of School 8, 2004)

8.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have emphasised the increasing dominance of market forces in education and the consequences for New South Wales public schools. The adoption of a market ideology has mandated a subtle redefinition of the aims of public education, with the system now predicated on offering greater choice to consumers. Recent attempts to reconcile past ideals with present exigencies have resulted in increased differentiation, although all school types continue to deliver a comprehensive curriculum. According to this study's informants, the development of a highly competitive education context has encouraged consumer perceptions of a schools hierarchy. This hierarchy, incorporating both government and non-government alternatives, highlights the degree of differentiation within the public system. Interviews conducted with principals, as reported in Chapter 6, reveal that while comprehensive coeducational schools were regarded as having the least appeal, some single-sex comprehensive variants – particularly all-girls' schools – are oversubscribed and experience sustained high demand from well outside their nominal drawing areas, indicating many families' choice against their neighbourhood schools.

In addition to this study's informants, other sources provide evidence that the academically selective schools (both single-sex and coeducational) are perceived to hold the greatest appeal for consumers. For example, Buckingham (2005, p.13) found that, 'Parents of children sitting the recent selective schools test at Sydney Girls High School strongly indicated their lack of faith in comprehensive public high schools, saying they would send their child to a private school if they missed a selective school place.' One principal of a selective boys' school states that,

We would like to think that we compete with the private schools to bring kids into the public system, who might otherwise go into the private system. I am very much a

believer in public education and I think that the fact that we have selective schools, and possibly the fact that we have single-sex schools, brings kids into our system who might otherwise be lost to us.

That's exactly what I was going to ask you.

Yes, I am sure that there are kids here – I have never actually done the statistics on it – probably forty or fifty per cent of the kids who if they weren't here would not be in a public school. They would be in a private school up the road, paying their \$15000 a year. (School 6, 2004)

According to a former Deputy Director-General (Schools), there is no question about the level of consumer demand for this alternative.

Those schools represent what they want for their children. It may not be what the local comprehensive parent group wants but for some parents – and after all, the parents are a powerful element of all of this, and if you look at the selectives it would be lovely for a lot of people if we didn't have selectives because everyone would fit into comprehensives and you would have genuine comprehensive education – but the reality of it is that you have five times over-subscription in the selective schools so some parents want it. For some kids it doesn't work but for many kids it does. It is a hothouse atmosphere for gifted children and, sure, it exists, and you are not going to turn it back. (Interview, Laughlin, 2005)

Likewise, the principal of an all-girls' selective school feels that it would be very difficult to remove this option from public education. According to this informant,

There is a history there. Parents like them, particularly for their daughters, Certain cultural groups, too, like single-sex, especially for their daughters. I think there would be a massive outcry if [selective girls' school] were to amalgamate with [selective boys' school]. Some people would find it a positive thing but I don't know that it would be the majority. (School 8, 2004)

A primary reason for the retention of the selective schools has been the attempt by New South Wales education authorities – at least since the late 1980s – to counter the appeal of the private school alternatives (West, 1991). In his *Report of the Independent Inquiry into Public Education in New South Wales*, Vinson (2001, p.8) concludes that 'there has been a more than doubling of fully selective academic high schools since 1988. The rationale for the increase in selective schools, as for

dezoning ...was to provide more diversity and choice to parents and students, especially in areas that had limited access to such schools.'

Despite the small size of this subgroup, the selective schools are the dominant point of reference for any discussion of academic performance in New South Wales, particularly in terms of competition between the government and non-government sectors.

As for academic achievement, a [*Sydney Morning Herald*] survey in December last year showed that while public selective schools took eight of the top 10 places in the NSW roll of honour, the top 50 list was dominated by private schools that charge high fees. (Grossetti, 2006, p.2)

The academically selective provision has also been blamed for the decline of some comprehensive schools (Campbell & Sherington, 2004; Vinson, 2001). For example, Vinson (2001, p.12) found that 'while enticing more able students to stay in the public system [the increase in the number of selective schools] depleted the ranks of academically oriented students in many comprehensive high schools.' This view is supported by the principal of one selective boys' school who reflects that '[b]asically there are 1440 kids between us and our sister school over the road, [selective girls' school]. That has a significant impact on the local comprehensive schools because it takes some of the better kids' (School 6, 2004). According to the principal of one selective girls' school, there is a significant difference between the populations of the two school types.

I mean, all schools in the public system do the very best for the particular community that they've got. We get a clientele that is creamed off, intelligence-wise. If we weren't getting the results that we are, we'd want to know why; a lot of people would want to know why. (School 8, 2004)

However, the fact that these schools are known for, and defined by, their longstanding practice of admission on the basis of academic merit may have produced a sense of familiarity among stakeholders that can explain the lack of any 'systemic attempt to evaluate these [selective] schools in the total context of public education' (Bonnor, 2002, p.16). Similarly, one former political adviser questions the

reluctance of education authorities to address the schools' impact upon the wider public system.

What is interesting about the schools debate is not what is said, but what is always left unsaid. And like Basil Fawlty never mentioning the war, the public education champions would not want us to utter *selective school*. Why? Because it is an admission that the public sector itself operates on exclusion and adverse selection ... Cream skinning has been going on for years in the state school system but the public education lobby have so far failed to either acknowledge it goes on or comprehend its impact. (Sanchez, 2005, p.1)

Given the egalitarian tenets proclaimed by the public system, Blackmore (2001, p.43) suggests that '[p]erhaps emulating the segregating, differentiating and selectivity tendencies of the private sector is not a 'public' alternative.' She asks, '[w]hat message does segregation on the basis of ability and gender (and more subtly culture and class) give about our society?' (p.43) As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Connell's (1993, p.41) reference to the 'more favoured, single-sex selective high schools' offers a sense of the prestige of this group and their consequent capacity to overshadow their counterparts. In the opinion of one serving principal and educational leader, the single-sex selectives have become 'islands in the public education community' (Bonnor, 2002, p.17).

It must be reiterated that the single-sex selective schools number only nine out of seventeen fully selective high schools and forty-six single-sex high schools, and therefore represent a fraction of the total. However, these schools are arguably the most exclusive secondary institutions operating within any public system of education in Australia and therefore represent the most overt departure from the philosophy of the local neighbourhood school that has underpinned NSW education since the 1960s (see Chapter 4).

In the opinion of one former Minister for Education, 'you tend to put those two things, single-sex schools and selective schools, pretty much in the same basket because they're the two things that are non-Wyndham' (Interview, Bedford, 2004). A focus on this single-sex selective subgroup is thus essential to this study's aim of understanding why consumers choose *against* the neighbourhood coeducational

comprehensive. With reference to contemporary and historical sources, this chapter explores the contribution of the New South Wales single-sex selective schools to the delivery of public education and the ways in which they market themselves to consumers. In this chapter it is argued that in spite of the ‘non-Wyndham’ characteristics of this subgroup, and the extremely limited availability of places, the schools in fact represent educational equity for those highly able students who can gain access.

8.2 The historically controversial nature of selectivity

In earlier chapters it was suggested that the New South Wales single-sex schools experienced a critical era during the 1970s and 1980s. An appreciation of the status of the single-sex selective variants during this period can be gained from the statements made by the then Minister for Education during sessions of the New South Wales Parliament. The Minister appeared anxious to reduce the influence of academically selective schools in contemporary education discourse.

Mr Cavalier: In conclusion let me say this about selective high schools and comprehensive high schools generally: a complete misapprehension is abroad about the comparative value of selective and comprehensive schools. The records of many of our comprehensive schools show that they are second to none. For example, Canterbury Boys High School [comprehensive boys’ school] has in public life today former students who include such prominent people as John Howard, the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party [Prime Minister 1996-]; Mr D. Swan, the Director-General of Education; His Honour Mr Justice Staples; and sharing distinction with any of those three, the honourable member for Earlwood. The reputation of many of the selective schools depends today not so much on tradition as on their development of specialities. Fort Street school, for example, depends as much for its reputation on its expertise on languages as on the men and women it produced in the past. (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1984, p. 561).

This statement suggests that by highlighting ‘the reputation of the selective schools’ the Minister was acknowledging their historic place in New South Wales but warning against any complacency on their part. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the increasing differentiation of public school types has been an official policy response to the rise of a competitive education market and Mr Cavalier’s reference to the ‘development of specialities’ should be considered in that light. Further, in

rejecting perceptions about the superiority of the selective high schools, Mr Cavalier specifically focuses the success of four single-sex comprehensive schools and their capacity to meet the needs of their community.

Other schools in the comprehensive education system have emerged as outstanding: Malvina High School at Ryde [1965-2001] is concerned with music; Petersham Girls High School [1965-1989] has developed an excellent reputation for providing opportunities for girls through what are known as other approved studies; Macarthur Girls High School [1957 -] has a high ethnic student component and high community involvement, and enjoys an excellent reputation. Dunheved High School [1973 -] at Mount Druitt, an underprivileged school, is performing excellent work in teaching agriculture. Cleveland Street Boys High School [1956-1981] (sic)¹ leads the State in providing educational opportunities for Aborigines. My conclusion from that, a view that is shared by all members of this House, is that all schools need to recognise that among their ranks of pupils can be found children with special talents. Whoever that child is, its gifts need to be nurtured and encouraged, for otherwise the grave danger would be that its full potential would be lost to the State. If such a child's talents are not exercised they could go to waste (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1984, p. 561).

In urging that all schools 'recognise that among their ranks of pupils can be found children with special talents' the Minister was arguably sending an implicit reminder to comprehensive schools about their responsibility to children of all backgrounds and abilities, a strong reflection of the fundamental tenets of the Wyndham Scheme.

Like the schools that select by gender, the academically selective alternatives have always been regarded by some as incompatible with commitments to equality and social justice. As a former Deputy President of the NSW Teachers' Federation [1986-1995] claims, 'generally we followed the British example rather than the American example. We followed the idea of separation rather than the idea of inclusiveness.' (Interview, Cavenagh, 2004) The deliberate separation of students by sex and academic ability has its origins in the very earliest stages of NSW public education (see Chapter 4). The selective schools generally, and their single-sex variants in particular, became obvious targets during the critical era identified in earlier chapters,

¹ This reference is likely to be an error. Cleveland Street Boys High School closed in 1981 (ref NSW Government Schools 1848-2003 NSW Department of Education and Training). Cleveland Street High School opened as a coeducational institution in 1982 and operated as a full high school until its closure in 2001.

when ‘Sex-segregated Junior, Technical, Home Science and selective/academic schools were ... systematically transformed into co-educational, comprehensive establishments in the second half of the 1970s’ (Campbell, 2003, p.586). The era, as explained in Chapter 4, was marked by the implementation of educational programs designed to offer equality of opportunity. If equality could be delivered through sameness, then schools should look alike. The epitome of such an egalitarian system was the comprehensive, coeducational model and the critical era that reduced access to single-sex schools and to the selective schools was thus dominated by a discourse that was not supportive of differentiation.

During the course of this study, it became evident that both the controversial nature and the consistently high appeal of the selective schools have been the subject of considerable political debate. An examination of NSW Parliament records for the 1970s and 1980s revealed some pertinent exchanges. A debate between Mr G. Yeomans (Hurstville, Lib) and a former Minister for Education gave a sense of the perceived status of the selective schools.

Mr Yeomans: The Minister’s comments made in this House some time ago concerning selective schools are pleasing, for, like the Minister, I attended a selective school, namely Sydney Technical High [selective boys’ school]. I am sure that many people in the community will be appreciative of the Minister’s support for the continuing availability of selective schools. However, I would support the comments by the honourable member for Bankstown who suggested that boundaries be removed so that all pupils in the State are able to gain entry to the selective schools system, rather than just those who happen to be fortunate enough to reside in a certain area. (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1984, p. 437)

Oral and written historical sources indicate that the continued existence of the academically selective schools, like that of the larger group of single-sex schools, is the result of policy developments that owe much to political patronage and pragmatism. Many of these schools were responsible for educating ‘the elite who would come to dominate the social and political life of post-war Australia’ (Campbell & Sherington, 2004, p.6). This is due in large measure to the fact that these schools represented the archetypal academic pathway during the first half of the twentieth century (see Chapter 4). The powerful connections of the schools were evident in the

1980s during a discussion in the NSW Parliament between the former Minister for Education and a member of the Liberal Opposition.

Mr Cavalier: As to the question of the elimination of selective high schools, let me say that the official departmental advice is approximately this. There has been considerable discussion over many years about the desirability or otherwise of maintaining selective high schools. The approach to secondary education in New South Wales is in the main through comprehensive co-educational neighbourhood schools. The few academically selective high schools in the Sydney metropolitan areas are allowed to remain because the long-established conditions associated with them are recognised. But beyond that, I should indicate that in my first day as Minister for Education, I attended a meeting of the permanent heads of the various arms of the education portfolio – convened, I might add, by my fellow graduate from Fort Street High School [co-educational selective school; previously separate selective boys' and girls' schools], my immediate predecessor, the Hon. Eric Bedford [Minister for Education 1976-1980 and 10.2.1984-5.4.1984]. We sat down with the Director-General of Education, the Director-General of TAFE, the Chairman of the Education Commission, the Chairman of the Higher Education Board and the other arms of the portfolio, and I indicated to both Mr Bedford and the permanent Heads that my first decision as Minister would be – and it was – that Fort Street High School will remain selective.

Mr Dowd: A good decision.

Mr Cavalier: It was, indeed, a good decision, as the honourable member for Lane Cove indicated, and on that, and nothing else, the honourable member for Lane Cove and the honourable Premier have agreed. Having made that decision on the curious notion that all other selective schools are equal to Fort Street - a fallacy that I shall not attempt to puncture – we must preserve all the selective high schools for at least the period that I am Minister for Education. I thought it might be of interest to the House to go through the social background of the socialist Government of New South Wales and look at the eighteen Ministers in the lower House, and look at the schools that the seventeen Ministers in New South Wales went to. The count is most interesting. Of the seventeen Ministers the count is as follows: comprehensive State schools, two; Catholic systemic schools, seven; and selective high schools, eight. If one adds up those figures one sees that there are no prospects that this House will eliminate selective high schools. (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1984, p.561).

Mr Cavalier's declaration that he would 'preserve' the few remaining academically selective schools in Sydney because of 'the long-established traditions associated with them' offers evidence of their heritage status. There is some irony in his deliberate reference to a 'socialist [Labor]' government in terms of the ideological contrast with the high proportion of its members who, like him, had benefited from an academically selective education. On the other hand, another informant of the same political persuasion said that the powerful New South Wales Teachers' Federation 'was very bitterly opposed to selective high schools, partly in the oddest sense that a lot of us had gone to selective high schools and hadn't been among the major successes.' (Interview, Cavenagh, 2004)

Government records show that constituents have exerted consistent pressure on their representatives to increase access to the selective schools. The following exchange, between a member of the New South Wales Parliament² and the former Minister for Education also supports the continued existence of the option, irrespective of ideology, as well as urging greater access to this provision.

Mr Gabb: My question without notice is directed to the Minister for Education. Is he aware of the existence of geographic intake boundaries in respect of selective high schools? Will he give consideration to the elimination of selective high schools? If that is not considered practicable, will the Minister give consideration to the elimination of geographic boundaries so that all pupils may have an equal opportunity to attend selective high schools?

Mr Cavalier: The question from the honourable member for Earlwood is typical of the thoughtfulness that he gives to all questions of public education and other matters that come before this House. I am aware of the existence of the geographic intake boundaries with respect to the selective high schools. There is a geographic boundary for each of the seven selective high schools in the metropolitan area. Pupils who gain entry to a selective high school have to qualify in terms of academic ability and residential address; that is, they must live within the geographic boundaries of the school. An exception to this relates to students whose parents attended a selective high school, or whose siblings attended, or attend, a selective

² The Honourable Kenneth Gabb (1949-) was the Labor member for the state seat of Earlwood between 1978 and 1988. At different times during this period he held the positions of Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and Minister for Mineral Resources. Mr Gabb was a graduate of Canterbury Boys High School.

high school. Such students may compete on equal terms with all other applicants within the boundaries.

As to the third part of the question from the honourable member for Earlwood, let me say that the situation concerning each selective high school is reviewed annually. The need to review the boundary is caught up in such reviews, and I can indicate that approval was given very recently for a variation to be made in the boundaries operating for the St George Girls' High School [selective girls' school] and the Sydney Technical High School [selective boys' school] so that the intake area for those two schools would become identical. It is not a current proposal that boundaries be eliminated. A proposal of that sort would require very careful consideration because of the impact it could have on the cost involved in such matters as selection procedures and the conveyance of students. If the honourable member has views on that he can put them forward. (NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1984, p. 562).

In spite of such evidence of consumer demand, during the critical era of the 1970s and 1980s (Chapter 3) several country centres to the north and south of Sydney were unable to retain their longstanding single-sex, academically selective schools (Chapter 4). In the north, Newcastle Girls' High School and Newcastle Boys' High School were closed in 1975 and 1976 respectively when they merged with other existing schools to become coeducational, comprehensive high schools. The Hunter/Central Coast region's two contemporary selective schools are Gosford High School and Merewether High School, formed as a result of merging Cooks Hill Girls High School and Newcastle [boys'] Technical High School in 1977. In the south, Wollongong High School was once a selective school but since 1993 has been designated a specialist school with a focus on the performing arts. The Illawarra/South Coast region now has one selective school, the coeducational Smiths Hill High School, which was a comprehensive girls' high school until 1978.

One historical informant asserts that the ideological tensions regarding selectivity have been in place for many decades.

It was a kind of political correctness. It was the policy; there was no doubt about it that there was a policy and you see it in the list of schools that have been created since 1961. Why? They're all of a model. And that's why they're always called Wyndham schools. So they had this model. Some regional directors decided that they were going to put the model right

through their region. Newcastle was one region, where they did, they did it right through. Wollongong was another.

So the regional director had the power to make a decision.

Oh yes, they would be the movers and shakers. They would put the [ideas] up to the department.

Would you surmise then that a regional director would have been happy to override parental objections for Newcastle because of ideological reasons?

Yes. Well, there was plenty of evidence that these kids were going to do better in the local schools, either just as well or better in the local comprehensives than they were in the selectives. I mean, we must not forget that. The selective schools look good because their top produces terrific results. What they don't do is do very well with the next rung down. (Interview, Cavenagh, 2004)

Another informant recalls that much lobbying that took place in the communities that were resistant to policy change.

Selectives that were single-sex were turned into co-ed schools against a lot of parental opposition ... and as an Inspector I still got a lot of resentment about that. Absolutely. Not from students but from community members.

Was this because they represented a way up and out of working class jobs?

There would have been all of that, of course. I am not sure of all of the reasoning but there was tradition and ownership by the communities, and they resented the changes being imposed on them.

So there wasn't a lot of consultation? I can't find very much evidence of consultation before the event in any Departmental records.

In my view, there would not have been a lot. There was a philosophical decision taken that the model should be comprehensive co-education. There would have been consultation leading up to the Wyndham Scheme, of course, but once that decision was made you wouldn't have gone to the local boys' and girls' high schools that you were intending to bring together as co-eds and consult about whether you wanted to or not. That philosophy was determined. The question was how you would bring it about, not whether you

would bring it about. But that is not what a lot of parents thought and many of them fought against that whole proposal.

Many of the selectives, the big selectives like Sydney Boys' and North Sydney Girls', fought a very strong rearguard action and were eventually left alone. But that was also true of some of the boys' and girls' high schools, the ordinary ones, and then of course you drifted through into the Metherell period where choice and diversity became the philosophy and more selectives were created. (Interview, Laughlin, 2005)

Eulogies following the death of a former Minister for Education responsible for many of the changes to the selective schools include one from a NSW politician who recalled the political repercussions of the critical era of the 1970s.

The Hon. J. F. Ryan: I understand that one issue controversial for Sir Eric Willis [Minister for Education 1972-1976], and a matter on which he faced a rally not dissimilar to some of the rallies faced by former Minister for Education Terry Metherell [1988-1990], was the closure of the Fort Street Girls High School [selective girls' school], among others. It was part of Sir Eric's plan to rationalise education, to make it more modern and more responsive. I am sure that Sir Eric honestly and earnestly believed in that plan (NSW Hansard, 12 May 1999, p.52).

The testimony of another Member of Parliament, who was also a graduate of a single-sex selective high school, reveals the emotional nature of the era for supporters of the selective schools.

The Hon. Patricia Forsythe: My other great memory of Sir Eric Willis was his decision as Minister for Education to close the four selective high schools in Newcastle: Newcastle Girls High School, Hunter Girls High School, Newcastle Boys High School and Newcastle Technical High school. I was the product of Hunter Girls High School, and my brother and sister of Newcastle Boys High School and Newcastle Girls High School, a school attended, as we know, by the Hon. Virginia Chadwick [Minister for Education 1990-1995]. They were schools that produced many citizens of note in the community of Newcastle and the State. When news reached me that Sir Eric had announced the intention to close those schools I was bitter and angry, and Sir Eric knew that for many years I did not forgive him for what he had done ... He was progressive in education and he had many views ... of course I was delighted

when we reintroduced selective high schools in Newcastle³ and parents in Newcastle have been voting with their feet ever since. One only has to see the number of students who apply each year for the only selective high school now in Newcastle to understand that I think he got it wrong in his decision to close those selective high schools. Of course, it was all about buying support from the Teachers' Federation but, as we Liberals know, that was a rare achievement (NSW Hansard, 12 May 1999, p.54).

At a federal level, more recently, a member of the Liberal Government has portrayed selective and single-sex schools as important elements in an education market that values differentiation rather than standardisation.

Selective schools are one way that states can provide a high-quality public alternative to independent schools and offer opportunities to students on the basis of merit, regardless of means....The failure of Australian state school systems to provide a comprehensive range of merit-based selective schools and centres of excellence is a national outrage...Why should state students put up with a monochromatic secondary school system ...? Why not have selective high schools, agricultural high schools, technology high schools, performing arts high schools, comprehensive high schools, co-educational high schools and single-sex high schools? What is wrong with each school having its own character, its own identity and its own areas of specialty? ... I will be asking the federal Minister for Education, Science and Training what avenues might be open to the Australian government to persuade the states to introduce selective schools ... (Fifield, 2004, p.1)

Such views highlight the complex and controversial position of the selective schools within New South Wales public education. Senator Fifield, quoted above, is disparaging of 'monochromatic' government secondary school systems as incapable of delivering educational programs that are both affordable and competitive, and suggests selective and single-sex schools, among other variants, as a solution. In a feature article about selective schools, a DET representative stressed that 'one of the most important functions of a state school system is to offer choices to parents and meet the needs of all students' (Yaman, 2002, p.16). Teacher unions, parent bodies and other stakeholders contend, as mentioned in previous chapters, that the major reason for the public system's enrolment losses is the increased funding of non-government schools. This began in the 1980s and intensified in the 1990s, when not

³ The schools reopened as coeducational institutions.

only Catholic but also Anglican, Islamic and other community and religious-based groups began to establish schools in increasing numbers (Campbell, 2003). The single-sex selective schools seem to have become the inevitable beneficiaries of a competitive marketplace, in which consumers demand differentiation in schooling.

8.3 Consumer access to single-sex selective schools

Campbell and Sherington (2004, p.2) refer to ‘the unusual feature of government secondary schooling in New South Wales, that is the presence of a large set of academically selective high schools.’ It has been shown in earlier chapters that the single-sex public schools in New South Wales far outnumber their counterparts in the three other jurisdictions (South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria) that still offer this educational alternative. Very few of this study’s informants were found to be aware of the existence of forty-six single-sex public high schools in New South Wales.

Conversely, nearly every interviewee was able to name most or all of the single-sex selective schools. Table 8.1 provides a list of the schools with their foundation dates, as well as the year in which the school was designated as academically selective, where that is different.

See print copy for table 8.1

At the time of completion of this thesis, there were seventeen fully selective public secondary schools in New South Wales, of which the majority are coeducational. There are also four agricultural high schools offering selective placement in Year 7. Since 1990, the provision has expanded to include nine partially selective coeducational alternatives.⁴ According to one Sydney newspaper article, the expansion of the selective provision has been effective.

While the top end of the preferred list is dominated by a cluster of long-established selectives like Sydney Boys and Sydney Girls, North Sydney Boys and North Sydney Girls, and Fort Street, the outer suburban selectives are becoming increasingly attractive (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 2002, p.6).

Table 8.2 shows the distribution of fully selective high schools by education region.

Table 8.2 – Location of the fully selective NSW public schools

Region	Boys' schools	Girls' schools	Coeducational schools
Sydney	2	2	2
Western Sydney			4
Northern Sydney	2	2	1
South-Western Sydney			1
New England	1		
Hunter/Central Coast			2
Illawarra/South Coast			1
Riverina			1
North Coast			
Western New South Wales			

As shown in Table 8.2, two Sydney regions and three non-metropolitan regions have coeducational but no single-sex selective schools, four New South Wales regions have one selective school each, and two regions have none at all.

⁴ Partially selective high schools have community-based classes as well as selective classes. Agricultural high schools are selective high schools which emphasise the study of agriculture, with the residential sections giving some priority to isolated students. (NSW DET 'Types of public schools' retrieved on 14 March 2006 from www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/types/selectiveschools.php)

8.4 A sample of single-sex selective schools

As with the single-sex subgroups examined in previous chapters, this study's analysis of the single-sex selective schools was informed by data collected from a wide range of contemporary sources.

Two selective institutions provide school-based perspectives. Details of these schools were provided in Chapter 2. It is important to note that the schools were invited to participate in this study on the basis that despite their common admission practices, they are located at opposite ends of the Sydney metropolitan area and have very different histories. They were also chosen because, according to the principals, they have slightly lower profiles than the oldest members of the single-sex selective subgroup and are consequently under less pressure to grant access to researchers.

Data from a third single-sex selective school was made available late in this research project as an unforeseen benefit of my own professional network. A leading teacher from a selective girls' school, retiring after over twenty years of service there, agreed to an interview. This was an opportunity to include material from an informant whose career in schools began during the critical era to which I have referred repeatedly in this study, i.e. the 1970s and 1980s. This teacher was a witness to the effects of political, economic and socio-demographic change on public schools in general and single-sex selective schools in particular.

The school is referred to as School 8A, which links it with the other single-sex selective girls' school, and acknowledges what might respectfully be described as its 'add-on' status in this study. It is important to note that School 8A is centrally located, placing it more or less halfway between Schools 6 and 8. Thus the three schools occupy spaces at northern, southern and central points of the city of Sydney and reflect considerable geographic diversity. School 8A has a very high public profile and, like the two other single-sex selective schools, attracts many more applicants than can be offered places.

8.4.1 The single-sex selective school populations

The inclusion of three selective variants in this study of the single-sex public school subgroup warrants some comparison between the demographic characteristics of their populations and those of their comprehensive counterparts. As discussed in Chapter 7, the single-sex school populations experiencing greatest socio-economic disadvantage were found to be those from particular non-English speaking and culturally and ethnically distinct backgrounds. In the case of the single-sex selective schools, the fact that most are located in more affluent Sydney suburbs tempts an assumption that their consistently high academic performance is due to the intake of students from uniformly wealthy and aspirational backgrounds. However, the data collected from the sample schools reveal marked ethnic and socio-economic diversity. There is evidence that consumer wealth does not always equate to aspiration, and even more importantly, the aspirational consumer is not always wealthy.

According to the principal of School 6, his school's population is reasonably typical of its single-sex selective peers.

At the moment, we have about 56 per cent Non-English Speaking Background students. I am not sure about the breakdown among the different ethnic groups but within the NESB group, probably 70 per cent of them would be Chinese kids and the other percentages would be from Indian and also Sri Lankan families. But if you went back to North Sydney Boys now, you would find it is probably 80 per cent NESB, even more so than here. (School 6, 2004)

The principal of School 8 also refers to the demographic mix at her school.

So is it possible to generalise about the school community?

Yes. We have about 47 per cent Chinese. The rest is a mix of other cultural groups but that is our largest community group. (School 8, 2004)

School 8A, located in a quite different area of Sydney, reports similar trends. The informant states that '[selective girls' school] is about 75 per cent NESB, mainly Asian, some Indian. [Male partner school] is similar but perhaps more Anglo-Saxon boys relative to total population' (School 8A, 2004).

In a continuation of the comparison with the single-sex subset described as disadvantaged in Chapter 7, it is interesting to note the proportion of students from recently arrived migrant families.

Would many of the students be first generation Australian?

Yes. I don't have the statistics but I would estimate that a third would have been born in Australia and two-thirds would have come from overseas, but many years ago probably. They might have been only two or three years old when they arrived. Certainly, a lot of them are first generation Australians. (School 6, 2004)

It is important to distinguish between Non-English Speaking Background families, in which English may be a second or subsequent language spoken at home, and other families whose children need to acquire English as a Second Language. Students being admitted to selective schools must have a good command of English in order to pass the entry tests; therefore, few students in these schools require ESL support. In this regard, the single-sex selective schools are likely to have fewer demands for support programs than the subset described in Chapter 7. The principal of the selective girls' school reflects, however, that the school has experienced significant demographic shifts along with most other Sydney suburbs.

And in socio-economic terms?

Oh, the full range. In fact, [we have] a high NESB population and a lot of our girls are first generation migrants.

So that is something that has changed over the last ten or twenty years?

Yes, yes. The Anglo-centric nature of the school has shifted and the European-centric nature of the school has also shifted. Actually, each wave of migration that you see is reflected in the school population, so the Greek and Italian wave has largely passed and we are looking more at Asian, Korean, Indonesian ... some of our girls are refugees. Quite a few of them, socio-economically, are poor. A lot of single-parent families, a lot of migrant families. We have girls on student assistance which they access when their family income is below a certain level. So you have your comparable, middle-class nuclear family, with the very privileged, if you like, upbringing and then we have the struggling migrant NESB family where English is not the first language in the home,

where the parents are channelling all of their efforts and their resources into the education of their children. (School 8, 2004)

The informant from one school points out that while some selective schools may appear mono-cultural, this does not tell the whole story.

This is certainly true for some of the Asian students, but by no means for all. These traits are also not exclusive to the Asian students at [selective girls' school] – this is what you would find in many schools. To be fair, Asian immigration was very strong during the Gold Rush of the 1850s and some of the Chinese families stem from this time. Because they have kept their physical traits, however, it is easy to lump them in with other more recent arrivals. But it is important to distinguish between the ones who are second and third, even fourth and fifth generation Australian, more Australian than I am. One of them asked me how long my family had been in Australia and I told her since the early twentieth century, and then I asked her about hers and she said they had been here since the 1850s! (School 8A, 2004)

As mentioned in earlier chapters, Riordan's (2002, p.13) review of international studies led to his conclusion that 'the academic and developmental consequences of attending one type of school versus another [single-sex versus coeducational] are typically insignificant for middle-class or otherwise advantaged students.' He maintains that the benefits of single-sex schooling are experienced most strongly by both males and females from ethnic and religious minorities because 'the major factor that conditions the strength of single-sex effects is social class, and since class and race are inextricably linked, the effects are also conditioned by race and sometimes by gender' (p.14). Notwithstanding the fact that race plays a far greater role in the American context of education, the notion of an 'inextricable' link between ethnicity and class is challenged by the informants from the single-sex selective schools in New South Wales.

Given that a key response of the public education system to an increasingly competitive market has been to provide greater diversity and choice, including more selective schools, it is interesting to consider how this is reflected in the appeal to diverse populations. As already mentioned, a characteristic of the most popular single-sex schools (especially the selective variants) is their capacity to attract students from widely differing geographic locations, socio-economic, cultural and

religious backgrounds. Earlier chapters also referred to the logistical implications for families who become active participants in an education market. Evidence has been provided of consumer willingness, when financially feasible, to move to areas that are perceived to offer more suitable educational options, or else to undertake long commutes to and from their chosen schools. This view is reinforced by the principals of the two selective schools included in this study. As the leader of the all-girls' selective school explains,

Demographic details: we draw from all over Sydney, we have girls from Prairiewood [west], we have girls from Sutherland [south], we have girls from Maroubra [south], the Eastern Suburbs, we have girls from the north. A lot of our girls do tend to live locally because if they do get in here they like to come to their local selective school and I do promote that because I think that it is important that the kids are not travelling hours and hours to get to the school but, yes, we have some little girls who travel an hour each way on public transport. (School 8, 2004)

A similar description applies to the population of the boys' selective school.

Where do the students live?

Anywhere. As far out as the Blue Mountains. From wherever anyone wants to travel. If they are prepared to spend an hour and a half travelling, which many of them do, then provided they have passed the test, they will get in.

But where would the bulk of the students come from?

The bulk still comes from the local area. (School 6, 2004)

What, therefore, distinguishes the girl from an Asian background, whose forebears arrived in Australia over 150 years ago, from her Arabic-speaking, Muslim counterpart, whose family settled in Sydney during the last decades of the twentieth century? Why did the former student aspire to enrolment at a single-sex selective school, possibly at some distance from home, whereas the latter enrolled at the neighbourhood single-sex comprehensive school? Which factors influenced these girls' decisions? Is it the case that some newly arrived immigrant and refugee groups come from multicultural situations where aspirations are high for both boys and girls, and others do not? Is this perhaps particularly the case for some nationalities, whose children are represented in ethnic clustering in many selective schools, both single-

sex and coeducational? One principal believes the combination of academic selectivity and gender segregation to be appealing '[p]articularly for some of the ethnic groups. Not so much for your WASPy people but certainly for the Chinese and the Indian and Sri Lankan families' (School 6, 2004).

Tinklin et al's (2003) Scottish study of six secondary schools and their nine feeder primary schools says more research is necessary to ascertain the many factors that can work against inclusivity in education. That study found wide variation in student attainment by social class and within groups examined separately by sex, evidence that some boys and some girls do well and some are underachieving, and that it is critical to avoid treating either sex as an homogenous group. The conclusion is that 'there is clearly a need to take a more complex view of the factors influencing people's experiences, which *at a minimum* combines gender, social class and ethnic background' (Tinklin et al, 2003, p.650).

Of the three single-sex selective schools included in this study, only one had recently conducted a formal survey of parents to determine the basis for their choice of school. At one girls' school, a questionnaire distributed to the parents of the incoming Year 7 students produced results that showed parents believed that 'Our HSC results and our reputation were important and our single-sex nature was important' (School 8, 2004). The principal's conclusion is that 'because we are in the top five, I guess, of selective schools, I can't imagine any government touching us. It's certainly not changing the single-sex nature' (School 8, 2004).

8.4.2 Perceptions of educational advantage

This study's informants support the argument that while the small number of single-sex selective schools makes them one of the least accessible options, they constitute a school type in which students from the widest possible demographic range participate in a learning environment that is conducive to academic success. In this sense, the high demand for, and enrolment patterns of, these schools indicate that they are perceived to be highly likely not only to enhance students' previously demonstrated ability but to remediate individual disadvantage.

Perceptions of the schools are a significant factor in their appeal for consumers. The principal of one selective girls' school says there are perceptions about all schools, including the selectives. 'Now you'd know from the league tables in the Sydney Morning Herald every year that James Ruse High School is considered to be the best, so if they can get to Ruse, they would probably go to Ruse' (School 8, 2004). Another principal claims that the academic success of a school is in direct relation to the quality of its intake.

There is a hierarchy of selective schools. The brightest kids go to James Ruse [coeducational selective school], so they get the best results. The next brightest go to North Sydney Girls and then Sydney Girls, Sydney Boys, North Sydney Boys, etcetera etcetera, and we are probably in the middle, tenth or eleventh on the list.

And that hierarchy exists in the minds of...

... the public. They [students] become a self-fulfilling prophecy, like our school does. I mean, we get good results, because we get good kids. If you get better kids, you get better results. Most of the time, that is. Obviously, I am talking in generalizations here. At James Ruse, their bottom mark is about where our top mark is, so their cut-off is where we begin. They get a lot of good kids but they are 99per cent Non-English Speaking Background. (School 6, 2004)

In the opinion of one informant, there exists 'this weird misconception that our school somehow attracts a different, more positive, scaling for our students overall' (School 8A, 2004). This school markets its 'value-added' component, which is the measure of students' improvement in some subjects over time. According to this informant, this cannot be underestimated as an element of the school's appeal. She acknowledges the correlation between the selection process and school success.

Of course, parents wrongly believe that James Ruse attracts the highest scaling of all – overlooking the real point, which is that the most able students on the Selective Schools test put James Ruse as their first choice. Statistics show that very few (often none) of the students who get into [selective girls' school] had achieved high enough marks to be accepted into James Ruse in the first place. Therefore one would expect James Ruse to get the best HSC results. By the same token, the more able student would choose [selective girls' school] over, for example, [comprehensive high school], so it is no reflection on

[comprehensive high school] that their HSC results are not as high as those for [selective girls' school]. (School 8A, 2004)

This informant also comments that,

The drawing area is huge. Girls will travel past [another selective girls' school] to get to [this school] because of perceptions about the school's status. We have had students from the Blue Mountains. The school is not in favour of this and believes long travelling time can be very detrimental, especially in the senior years. If given the chance, the school counsels against students coming from far away. (School 8A, 2004)

Student demand determines the scores needed for admission each year and there is evidence of competition within the group, the strongest appeal being of those schools that achieve the best results in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate.

According to a Sydney newspaper article, 'James Ruse [Agricultural High School] has been the top-performing school for a decade but 15 other selective schools were also in the top 25 of HSC achievers last year [2004 results]' (Doherty and Norrie, 2005, p.3).

Another principal points to the importance of public perceptions.

It's the perception of the school in the district in the community that it serves; it's the kids on the railway stations; it's the wearing of the uniform. I know it's petty, but that is how it is. Our girls wear their uniform. It's not being scruffy, not being rowdy in the shopping centres, it's that sort of stuff. If the perception of our school spirals downwards, we lose the top achievers to other schools. (School 8, 2004)

The principal's concern about the loss of the 'top achievers', however, may be seen as evidence of a hierarchy within that group.

I take any complaints that I get – and they're not very many- I take them very seriously, because one or two kids in the community or one unfortunate incident that gets into the media can really spell the doom of a school. Now, while I'm always assured of 150 kids each year, it's the quality of those kids that I need to get. (School 8, 2004)

Regardless of any school's position in the selective hierarchy, the guarantee of an extremely able annual intake reduces the need to participate in a highly competitive market.

We don't have to market the school and that is where I am very lucky.

For people who don't live in the area and don't know about [School 6]?

I don't need to go out and market for those people. I have enough people wanting to come here anyhow. I know it sounds a bit arrogant, but that is the reality. We don't have to do it. Selective schools are well known and now we're getting a reputation. We're seen as a good, viable option now to places like [selective boys' school] because we are not as academic, because I do emphasise things like drama, music and art, besides the academic pursuits. (School 6, 2004)

This principal's statement that that there are 'enough people wanting to come' to his school highlights the difference between the selective and comprehensive environments. That is, the selective schools are under less pressure to construct the appeal for their schools, because their appeal for consumers is more defined. Time and money can therefore be dedicated to strategies that address the needs of the students. This distinguishes these schools from those that report declining populations and may feel compelled to commit human and material resources to developing and demonstrating greater appeal for consumers.

8.5 How the single-sex selective schools construct their appeal

Earlier chapters provided evidence that some single-sex schools have responded to a competitive education context by marketing their ‘special something’. An examination of the Department of Education and Training’s website identified patterns in the marketing semiology of some single-sex comprehensive schools, indicating the appropriation of contemporary discourses about the education of males and females. A number of schools promoted the single-sex environment as a key factor in their capacity to support the academic, co-curricular and personal development of their students.

As mentioned in earlier sections, it is self-evident that academic achievement is the defining characteristic of the single-sex selective schools. This may be the only group of New South Wales public schools whose ‘special something’ is so well established in the mind of consumers that it requires little direct marketing. Given this study’s emphasis on the single-sex provision as a whole, and its comprehensive and selective subsets in particular, it is necessary, nevertheless, to investigate the manner in which the most exclusive schools present themselves to consumers. In line with the focus on the comprehensive schools in Chapters 6 and 7, this chapter also examines the official web pages that offer consumers an initial description of individual schools.⁵ As with the single-sex comprehensive schools, some semiological patterns can be found that present the selective variants as highly distinctive in public education.

8.5.1 Marketing exclusivity

The semiological analysis of the schools’ official web pages revealed that five of the nine single-sex selective schools made some reference to age, tradition and/or their alumni(ae).

The school ... is the oldest State girls’ school in New South Wales.

*

The uniqueness of the school lies in its tradition as the first state secondary school...old boys and supporters of High are fundamental to the operation of the school. (Selective boys’ school)

*

⁵ www.schools.nsw.edu.au/schoolfind/locator/summaryschool.php

Established 90 years ago, [selective girls' school] is an academically selective school for girls.

*

[Selective boys' school] is a selective school with strong traditions of high academic achievement and excellence in the fields of sport, the arts and community service.

*

The school's history, traditions and value for academic excellence and the development of the whole person are actively supported by the parent body and the Old Girls' Union. (Selective girls' school)

Additionally, one boys' school declared that it 'embodies a conservative culture.' By employing such language the schools claim a particular status in New South Wales education.

8.5.2 The selective school ethic of care

The marketing semiology of the comprehensives has been shown to place a strong emphasis on a safe, caring environment that permitted a special focus on meeting the needs of one sex. With reference to the single-sex selective schools, their semiology suggests that the academic nature and purpose of these institutions is inextricably interwoven with a commitment to care. Some examples were found on the schools' official websites.

The school places a very high focus on ensuring effective teaching for gifted girls. The school culture is one of high expectations, where students are safe to take intellectual risks within a very supportive and caring framework. (Selective girls' school)

*

The school aims to provide for its students an environment which is challenging, enriching and supportive ... (Selective boys' school)

*

The school is highly regarded for the care it takes of its students. (Selective boys' school)

*

Since its foundation ... the school has enjoyed an excellent reputation as a school with a strong academic focus within a caring and supportive environment. (Selective girls' school)

*

At [Selective boys' school] we aim to provide a supportive environment that is conducive to the total development of all students.

However, it is essential to appreciate that these students are admitted because of their prior academic *achievement* as well as their intellectual *potential*; they should thus be regarded as having made a pro-academic choice before entering the selective school environment.

If this choice is accepted as the fundamental distinguishing feature – perhaps the ethic of difference – of the student population, it follows that a pro-academic ‘ethic of care’ is what characterises that setting. That is, most or all members of the school community are likely to be committed to a pro-academic environment, including teachers, support staff, parents and students. The selection process thus represents a conscious bargain being struck between school and consumer, unique in terms of the intellectual effort students must make to gain admission as well as the level of academic nurturing (read achievement) the schools are expected to deliver. This bargain appears to be carefully articulated in the examples from the schools’ web pages.

8.5.3 Putting like minds together

In addition to school-based material, some official publications reinforce the message that single-sex selective schools are organised in ways that enhance and reward pro-academic behaviour. According to the Department of Education and Training, the selective schools provide ‘an educationally enriched environment for highly achieving, academically talented students’ (NSW DET Online 2006). It may be argued, then, that the combination of academic selectivity and gender segregation establishes a structural norm that resonates with consumers. In this section I draw on Riordan’s (2002) contention that the more distinctive the school type, the more selective the school body will be. His conclusion is that ‘rare school types are better able to *supply* the quality of school *demand*ed by these more selective students’ (p.16). Although his conclusion was based only on schools that practice gender selectivity, I contend that the extremely high demand for the New South Wales single-sex selective schools – arguably the rarest public school type offering a comprehensive curriculum – is evidence of this model’s appeal.

The 'special something' of the single-sex selective schools may also lie in their capacity to meet the intellectual needs of boys and girls in educationally and socially equitable environments. The principal of one girls' selective school claims that,

We are part of it, of the provision of public education; the belief in some quarters that putting like minds with like minds is the way to go to develop kids to their optimum level. So we are part of the selective school system and then the girls' aspect of it is providing opportunities for girls to have single-sex schooling. So, it is those two ... the gifted and talented and the gender equity programs. (School 8, 2004)

Another principal emphasises the inclusive nature of the schools, especially for intellectually gifted students whose personalities might affect their progress in a more mixed environment.

The good thing about sending them to a selective school, of course, is that there are other kids of like minds. They can work with each other. You can be an eccentric and survive. There are a lot of eccentric kids in this school who in a typical comprehensive school – particularly some of the boys' school that I would be aware of – would be chewed up and spat out in no time, but the kids can get away with it here. You can be gay if you want to and no one will give you a hard time. You can be a little nerd if you want to, and we have plenty of those, and no one gives you a hard time, because there are lots of other nerds around, including some of the staff, so they all get along well. Those are some of the benefits of it and I spell that out. If your son is ego-involved and feels good about himself because he beats others, don't send him here. But if he is task-involved, which means he feels good about himself because he achieves a particular task, then selective schools can be very good. (School 6, 2004)

In promoting their schools as safe spaces for students who might not be suited to other school environments, such as those who might be labelled 'eccentric', 'gay' or 'nerd', the principals offer a redefinition of an equitable environment. The strategy of putting like with like is reflected in the semiology of some selective schools' marketing. In an example from the DET's website one school was found to claim that,

Because of the nature of the school, students have the opportunity to interact and learn with others like themselves in a stimulating environment that is focused on their needs. (Selective girls' school)

8.5.3.1 Meeting the needs of selective school students

According to this study's informants, it should not be assumed that the selective environment focuses exclusively on the academic needs of students. The ethic of care emphasised in the schools' electronic marketing claims should be seen, they say, as encompassing a commitment to an holistic approach. According to the principal of one school, 'There is the academic and there is the welfare. While the UAI is really important and we want our girls to be successful, we also want them to be happy...we want to encourage all their talents (School 8, 2004). Both principals explain that their schools have to be prepared to address the same challenges as any other institutions.

I spend most of my day talking to kids who are suicidal or depressed or down and out or who have run away from home. People don't think that those things happen in selective schools but they do. (School 6, 2004)

*

We have some very needy kids, with mental illness, the usual teen girl anorexia, bulimia, self-mutilation, kids that are depressed. We have the full gamut of issues that we deal with here. (School 8, 2004)

This study's informants provide evidence that consumer expectations of both the selective schools and their students are particularly high and that the capacity of the staff to meet the personal and academic needs of students is frequently tested.

According to the principal of the selective boys' school,

Parents appreciate my honesty, I think, because I say to them, 'Don't expect that just because your son walks through into this school that he's going to walk out with a UAI of 99, because he is not. He has to work. All that getting in here shows is that he has the ability to do the work. Whether he will do well or not is largely on his shoulders. It's the old story of you can take a horse to water but you can't make him drink. We provide them with opportunities, we do everything we can for them, we support them as best we can. But if they say, 'Nah, not gonna', then they're 'not gonna.' And they won't get anywhere. Some of our kids do very badly, in the 30 per cent of the state, when they should be in the top 5 per cent or 10 per cent. There is a whole range of reasons for that, most of which – pretty well all of which – are out of our control. (School 6, 2004)

Like their single-sex comprehensive peers, the single-sex selective variants must accept all students who are offered a place. The evidence from principals of the two school types suggests that they encounter numerous challenges in meeting the needs of their particular cohorts, although these vary according to the particular socio-cultural, socio-economic and other characteristics of their populations. While the selective schools provision is represented as catering for the 'top achievers', this shapes parental expectations and may not always attract the students who are most suited to that environment. As mentioned earlier, in the absence of research-based statements that address the philosophical and pedagogical basis for offering a range of school types, consumers are likely to make choices based on instinct, hearsay, personal experience and aspiration. In a competitive market, apparently featuring a hierarchy of schools, it is arguable that the most exclusive options will inevitably hold the greatest appeal. It is valid, then, to consider the system's capacity to deliver equity in a highly differentiated provision.

8.5.4 Gender equity in the absence of the other sex

As has been seen in earlier chapters, this study's informants are divided on the effects of a differentiated system. The website of one New South Wales selective school refers to its capacity to redress any inequities in the education of boys.

[Selective boys' high school] provides equal opportunity for boys to achieve excellence in academic, cultural, sporting and social endeavours, in an environment conducive to learning, teaching and friendship.

According to one principal, a key role of the school is to reassure boys about their ability to compete against girls.

The boys do the things which in a co-ed school the girls would tend to do. We train them the entire year to be Peer Support leaders and then we pick out a particular number, but everyone gets trained in it, a nurturing role. The leadership roles of School Captain and Vice-Captain and Prefects and all of those things obviously are boys. They take off all the academic prizes. So they can say, 'Hang on, boys can achieve.' (School 6, 2004)

The schools operate from a philosophical standpoint of presumptive equality, wherein all roles and opportunities are contested by either boys or girls and no activity (i.e. music, debating, sport) carries gender-specific connotations. In this sense, gender equity strategies originate at school level in response to the needs of the students.

The principal of School 8, for example, asserts that her leadership reflects ‘a really deep and thorough understanding of the forces that act on girls and women in society, and how we as educators need to challenge assumptions about girls and women’ (Interview School 8, 2004). Thus her role involves a conflation of the academic focus with the creation of an environment in which females develop other, non-academic skills to help them in post-Year 12 contexts.

According to Woolley (2000, p.16), ‘[t]he discourse of male disadvantage embedded in current gender politics has distorted the picture of girls’ post-school outcomes.’ There are implications for current notions of school-based gender equity when these trends are examined. That is, the academic gains made by many girls in Year 12 examinations must be balanced against their comparatively weaker long term career outcomes and lower incomes in relation to males (Hillman & Rothman, 2004; Woolley, 2000; Hayes, 1998). The development of self-confidence and leadership skills are seen as helpful in this regard. The second generation of girls’ schools may be regarded as supportive of a discourse of disadvantage that argues that the academic strength demonstrated by some girls in Year 12 examination results must be accompanied by the development of other attributes that will assist them in a workplace that continues to privilege males (Hillman & Rothman, 2004; *Redress*, 2000; Hayes, 1998).

Woolley (2000, p.17) claims that there is strong evidence of continuing sex segregation of work participation patterns as well as gender bias in the assessment of the financial worth of the work women do. Similarly, the principal of one selective girls’ school has reservations about the post-school outcomes for girls.

I mean the outcomes for girls at the exit level of schooling are better than for boys, so everyone is running around talking about boys’ education and how we need to bring boys up to speed but what I am interested in is not just that but that down

the track the career aspirations of the girls and the levels that they reach in their careers still do not match males. So while girls are outperforming boys at school, at high school, they are still underrepresented in the higher paying and, if you like, the more powerful sections of our society. So there is still a force acting there that is something apart from sheer ability. (School 8, 2004)

The concern expressed by this principal about girls' post-school disadvantage is a theme found in some schools' official web pages.

... the school prepares the gifted girl to become the successful woman of the future. (Selective girls' school)

*

... the school seeks to continue its tradition of assisting its gifted young women to achieve their full potential and to prepare them to take leading roles as active members of society. (Selective girls' school)

The testimony of the principal of the selective boys' school indicates a similar assessment of male and female post-school outcomes.

If you look at the UAI [Universities Admissions Index] it is still predominantly girls... There is obviously a sprinkling of boys. But if you looked at the first and second places, the top dozen, in English Extension 1 and 2, etcetera, you'll find they are predominantly girls. But I still come back to the point, as I say to the boys: 'Don't worry, fellas, because by the end of third year university you will have caught up and you've beaten them again.

Not to mention becoming CEOs of companies and so on ...

Well, that's right. I mean, that's the problem. There is no glass ceiling for boys, to the same extent that there is for girls. (School 6, 2004)

The fact that the leaders of selective schools reflect on the relative success of boys and girls in this way prompts questions about the effects of gender equity programs in all schools. Ailwood and Lingard's (2001, p.15) analysis of the national document *Gender equity: A framework for Australian schools* notes the 'shift in focus from girls, and boys in relation to girls, to equity for all girls and boys ... [as removing] a direct challenge to dominant forms of masculinity ...' As discussed earlier in this study, notions of equity are frequently linked with those of equality, reflecting the notion that if the same resources and facilities and opportunities can be provided for

both sexes, gender equity is inevitably more likely. Starr and Gill (2002) assert that this is difficult to achieve. They cite Bacchi (1990) to argue that in order to accommodate the differences between individuals, 'equitable treatment would actually require that they be given different treatment' (Starr & Gill, 2002, p.32).

8.5.5 Rejection of non-academic influences

In the view of one informant, the key difference at single-sex selective schools is that the students 'lack the social distractions which can cause so many other students to lose their way' (Interview, School 8A, 2004). Similarly, the principal of the selective boys' school says that the single-sex nature of the schools holds strong appeal.

So there is a perception amongst [foreign-born] parents that selective schools are very good options, and the best option in the state system. Selective boys' schools seem to be fine for them; they don't have an issue of having to have their boys with girls. They believe, in fact, that their sons may work better without girls being around.

Have you had that conversation with parents?

Oh, yes. They think there is less disruption and less distraction.
(School 6, 2004)

On the basis of the informants' testimony, it is possible to conclude that the unique environment of the single-sex selective schools reduces the influence of 'youth culture' issues identified by Riordan (2002) as being detrimental to the success of students at many coeducational, comprehensive schools. The single greatest obstacle to any school's success, he claims, is the non-academic influence that is brought to some schools by students who reject the structural norms promoted by the most successful institutions. In Riordan's (2002, p.21) view, the 'challenge of effective and equitable schooling in the next century is to overcome the resistance and recalcitrance of youth cultures in and out of school'.

The capacity of the single-sex environment to reduce non-academic tensions and, by implication, allow students to focus more closely on their academic pursuits, is reinforced by the principal of an all-girls' school.

I just recently went to a principals' briefing on a kit that's been given out to all our schools in the district on sex-based harassment. If I were in a co-educational setting, that would be a major priority for us, as a school. We are still going to implement it, I will still brief the staff – we're going to modify some of the survey instruments for students and staff because our main goal is to uncover whether there is any sex-based harassment in this school - and we suspect there isn't a lot. There's not even much bullying. Homophobia is virtually non-existent. In fact, the girls are very supportive of girls who come out. So, for me, that priority is not there, but if I were in a co-ed situation, it would be a massive priority, and it would be something that I would be really pushing.

So you're really inferring that there is a problem in coeducational environments with sex-based harassment.

I'm saying that sex-based harassment, student-to-student, is usually perpetrated by males on females. I think the statistics would bear that out, and in the absence of boys in this school to harass the girls, the girls are very free and feel very liberated in the sense that they don't have to worry about what they say or the discussion. I mean, I noticed it when I went from a co-ed environment; I worked at [co-educational comprehensive high school], I worked at [co-educational comprehensive high school], then I went to [single-sex comprehensive high school], and immediately in the classroom, the sorts of topics that you could discuss, the level of intimacy of the discussion, that you could talk about was just unbelievable, compared to how you were gagged in a co-ed environment. (School 8, 2004)

This principal's testimony is further evidence that the appeal of the single-sex selective schools can vary according to whether they cater for girls or boys. It suggests that the principals feel justified in pointing to the particular benefits to be derived from the single-sex environment and that these are likely to be reflected in the schools' marketing strategies. The evidence from a sample of single-sex selective schools reflects their conviction that their practices and achievements demonstrate adherence to the spirit of equitable schooling. They believe they are meeting the needs of a wide range of students who might otherwise either be lost to the non-government schools or fail to thrive in another educational environment. Moreover, the schools' enduring appeal may be a sign of 'the importance of considering the influences of social class, ethnicity and gender in conjunction where possible' (Tinklin et al, 2003, p.644).

9 In summary

Well, probably most of the ones [single-sex schools] that are there now survive because somebody really wants them to. You know, either because they're selective and successful, like [girls' selective], or non-selective but highly successful, like [boys' comprehensive] and [girls' comprehensive]. Or the Muslim ones, I guess, where although there are huge problems, the Muslim community and particularly the poorer part of it wants the Bankstown and Auburns. (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004)

9.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate the enduring appeal of an Australian educational phenomenon: the single-sex public high schools of New South Wales. There was no intention of making a case for or against single-sex schools. Rather, the findings were intended to inform stakeholders of the extent and nature of the contemporary provision and argue for a more prominent role in the discourse of schooling for those institutions and communities whose experience of gender-segregated educational programs is unique in the New South Wales public sector. With this in mind, this final chapter is written in as practical and policy-oriented manner as possible, given the context of a thesis.

Pointing to the schools' unique capacity to encourage the uptake of subjects across traditional gender lines and to support the development of leadership and other skills in an atmosphere of reduced masculine versus feminine pressures, principals of both single-sex selective and comprehensive schools were unequivocal about their ability to deliver equitable educational programs. In addressing the overarching question of what constitutes their enduring appeal, it has been shown that many single-sex public schools in New South Wales, comprising around ten per cent of all secondary schools, now actively market their distinctive environments, drawing on current discourses of boys' and girls' education to appeal to consumers. The continued demand for places at both boys' and girls' public high schools, it is argued, is evidence that gender segregation is no barrier to consumers and that each of these schools endures because 'somebody really wants them to.' (Interview, Burnswoods, 2004)

9.2 The findings of the study

This chapter summarises the findings of the study primarily by focusing on the research questions listed in Chapter 1, as follows:

- Which schools are they?
- What sustains them?
- How do the schools fit into the provision of public education?
- What does the future look like for these schools?

9.2.1 Which schools are they?

This study has found the single-sex public schools to have a relatively low profile, with the exception of those that are distinguished by their academic selectivity, specialist curriculum focus or other features. Given that forty-five of the forty-six single-sex public schools are located in the New South Wales capital, and that no new single-sex schools have been established since 1977¹, access to this educational option remains extremely limited.

At the time of writing, the single-sex nature of the schools did not warrant their separate listing on the official website of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. This is juxtaposed with the fact that the single-sex option is presented as evidence of the diversity of public education and, in the event that one is not available in the applicant's area, an application can be provided to the education authorities.² In summary, if a school admits only boys or girls, this is likely to be discovered only incidentally, with the result that consumers who wish to consider a single-sex public high school have less ready access to the available information. This, it is argued, indicates an apparent reluctance of education authorities to promote the single-sex option per se, perhaps motivated by concern that this could lead to pressure to expand the provision. Further, the absence of detailed policy in regard to single-sex schooling may be seen as evidence of the unresolved debate over an issue that is at odds with the longstanding philosophy of public education.

9.2.1.1 Three single-sex school subgroups

¹ The single-sex secondary schools established after the implementation of the Wyndham Scheme in 1961 were existing single-sex junior high schools that underwent the conversion to full high schools. All new high schools built in Sydney's outer suburbs and elsewhere in the state during the 1960s and 1970s were comprehensive, coeducational schools.

² A complete list of the New South Wales single-sex public schools is provided in Appendix F.

The static but nevertheless significant size and geographic distribution of the single-sex provision made it both feasible and prudent to attempt to answer the research questions through a close examination of representative schools. The subsets emerged as a result of the data collected from informants and a range of documents, as well as site visits to nine sample schools.

The best-known and most obvious subset was found to be that which selects by both gender and academic ability. The earliest purpose-built high schools were all single-sex institutions, offering a direct pathway to tertiary education. The findings of this study have demonstrated that the uninterrupted existence of schools such as the Sydney Boys and Girls High Schools [est. 1883], North Sydney Boys' High School [est.1915], North Sydney Girls' High School [est.1914], St George Girls' High School [est.1916] and Sydney [Boys] Technical High School [est.1913] places them in a category of their own. Three other single-sex selective schools were established some decades later and each has had a different experience of selectivity.

A second subset was identified as the single-sex comprehensive schools, which comprise the majority of the New South Wales single-sex provision. These schools were found to vary considerably in terms of age, prestige, enrolment levels, socio-economic status and consumer perceptions of effectiveness. Like their selective peers, the single-sex comprehensive schools are located throughout the city. The findings of this study suggest that many of these schools remain relatively unknown outside their immediate drawing areas, whilst others attract students from a wide range of suburbs.

This study identified a third subset of single-sex schools on the basis of distinctive socio-economic and cultural characteristics. A number of schools located in Sydney's south-western and western suburbs have undergone demographic transformations as a result of migrant settlement. Some of these schools have been classified as disadvantaged and a range of informants have testified to the unique challenges faced by educators in their attempts to meet the needs of these students and their communities.

9.2.2 What sustains them?

In answering the question about what sustains the single-sex public high schools, this study has addressed overarching issues that arguably pertain as much to New South Wales public education generally as to the single-sex provision and its variants in particular.

Chief among these is the growing pressure on all schools from a highly competitive education market, resulting from federal and state governments' adoption of a neo-liberal, economic rationalist approach and the accompanying advocacy of choice as a consumer right. The evidence from informants and official documents reveals the single-sex schools as a diverse provision, particularly in terms of the difference in enrolment statistics between boys' and girls' schools and within the groups of all-boys' and all-girls' schools. It has been shown that many boys' schools have markedly fewer enrolments than their female counterparts but one oversubscribed comprehensive boys' school was included in this study as an example of the opposite scenario. This supports the assessment of a range of informants that consumers are more favourably inclined towards the single-sex option for their daughters.

Principals and other key informants have also testified that schools are sustained by consumer perceptions of academic success, a disciplined learning environment and care and support for individual students. Evidence from the single-sex selective schools and the oversubscribed single-sex comprehensive schools has made it clear that gender separation does not alienate, and may even attract, many consumers.

Given that all students who attend a single-sex school have a coeducational alternative, a key finding of this study is that these families have effectively chosen *against* the local, neighbourhood comprehensive model and *for* a single-sex school. However, the lack of large-scale survey data makes it impossible to determine the precise level of support for the single-sex option.

The findings of this study indicate that the single-sex selective schools are sustained by their pro-academic reputation and consistently high and well-publicised performance in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate. In addition, their longstanding presence and powerful connections through alumni(ae) confer on them a

status that, according to principals and other key informants, is unique in the public system. This study has also found that some Sydney single-sex selective schools are notable for the clustering of particular ethnic groups, a characteristic they share with some of the State's most disadvantaged single-sex comprehensive schools. The principal of one selective girls' school testified that a large proportion of the students came from disadvantaged backgrounds. In this regard, these schools reflect an integration of social class, ethnicity and gender that can be seen to be meeting the needs of gifted and talented children in the most equitable manner possible given the small size of the provision. A conclusion of this study, therefore, has been that the single-sex selective schools, far from being the preserve of white, middle-class and privileged young people, have enduring appeal in part because 'the academic environment is normative in a true sociological sense' (Riordan, 2002, p.20) and this overrides all other issues relating to ethnicity, gender and social class.

The interviews with principals and other key figures indicate that the single-sex comprehensive schools that boast high enrolments also draw from a wide range of socio-economic and ethnic groups, in addition to selecting by gender. One boys' and one girls' school, located in very different parts of Sydney, provided evidence that a majority of their students came from outside the schools' immediate drawing areas. Both were so oversubscribed that they had had to install portable classrooms, but both principals were adamant that their communities value the schools' nature and purpose so highly that this was not enough to deter prospective students. Both revealed a highly pro-academic emphasis, underpinned by the desire to make all programs relevant to the needs of the sex of the student population, irrespective of the lack of gender-specific policy direction.

Another key factor found to sustain the single-sex schools has been the demonstrable attempts by some schools to respond to particular communities' socio-cultural needs. Principals and other key figures have identified ethnic clustering as a feature of a group of schools in south-western and western Sydney, where communities have demonstrated a strong preference for gender segregation. The findings of this study show that a significant number of schools serving Arabic-speaking Muslim families have made specific structural adjustments to accommodate religious and cultural beliefs and practices and that this is highly valued by consumers. There is evidence,

however, that in their increasingly mono-cultural identity, these schools have become isolated from the mainstream and are experiencing considerable difficulty in both attracting a broader range of students and remaining competitive in the education market. The data collected from staff and other stakeholders has revealed a significant disparity between the schools' evident appeal for specific communities and the overarching aims of public education. This study's informants have given evidence that these schools risk isolation and decline but have questioned whether it is within the capacity of education authorities to address all of the problems that exist in these areas.

9.2.3 How do the schools fit into the provision of public education?

In answering this question, this study has found that the nature and role of the single-sex public schools remain unclear. That is, if the schools have some other nomenclature or specialisation, that is their defining identity. Consistent evidence from principals and other informants has indicated that the single-sex schools are considered to be part of the public system and are not recognised as a separate group on the basis of gender selectivity.

The data collected as a result of this study have revealed the philosophical and practical sensitivities of a large public education sector grounded since the 1960s in a commitment to a single school type, confronted by the market-driven policy climate in which schools must now operate. As Campbell (2003, p.578) summarises,

The rise of the comprehensive high school through the adoption of the 'Wyndham Scheme' in the 1960s produced one of the last great and confident attempts in Australia to create a common school, in active disregard of existing regional patterns of schooling provision, and the social character and aspirations of local populations. With such origins, it has been particularly vulnerable to new policy directions from governments. They have included not only older policies associated with multiculturalism and assistance to 'disadvantaged' schools (government and non-government), but also more recent policies associated with neo-liberalism, including the creation of new opportunities for school choice in 'educational markets.

All of the historical informants in this study were witnesses to the ideological shifts that have reduced the single-sex school provision to less than half of its original size. They have provided evidence of the acceptance by education authorities of the need to provide diversity and choice to consumers. The findings of this study would appear to indicate that single-sex public schools give families access to an educational option that many cannot afford in the private system.

Yet the evidence from key figures, including school principals, as well as from historical and contemporary written sources, reveals an unwillingness or inability on the part of education authorities to fully accommodate the market reality. In this study it has been demonstrated that the single-sex public schools find themselves in active competition within their own sector as well as with non-government schools and that this has a significant influence on principals' decisions regarding the operations of their schools. This study found considerable evidence of the adoption of gender-oriented marketing strategies that are not perceptibly grounded in any material published by the education authorities. An examination of the marketing semiology employed by numerous schools indicates a belief that consumers are responsive to claims about the benefits of gender segregation. If it is accepted that principals know what their communities want and are best placed to appeal to consumers, then these strategies provide some explanation of the enduring appeal of the single-sex schools.

Second, the paucity of references to the single-sex schools in official Department literature has had the effect of reducing their presence and silencing their 'voice' in the discourse to the point where, as found in this study, the majority of informants, despite their substantial involvement in public education, were not aware of the size of the provision.

The uncertain place of the single-sex schools is reflected in an exchange with a retired New South Wales educationalist.

Some researchers talk about single-sex schools as 'the group left out' of the education discourse. Would you agree with that?

Probably.

That question came about because I was interested to know from principals where the expertise and experience of those schools and the details of how they deliver their programs to boys and girls and the discoveries they have made and so on, where all of that information ...

... resides. Good question. Yes, we don't capitalise on them nearly enough. That is absolutely true. That is because in a sense they are a system of schooling that the Department isn't quite sure it wants to go out and publicly support. That is my perception of it. It is a bit frustrating for those schools, I am sure. They are wonderful schools and the demand from parents is huge. What tends to happen is that they look inwards at themselves and how they might connect better with their communities and enshrine their popularity, and that is exactly what you are observing. And that is a natural and highly predictable process.

It just seems ironic that there is so much energy and creativity and innovation going on in this group of schools...

Absolutely.

... and the principals have expressed to me their feeling that they've got something good happening but there's nowhere to go, who do they talk to?. Some obviously feel very frustrated that conversations are taking place all around them but they are not included in them. For example, one principal said to me that it's a case of 'Do you want to know about boys' education? Come and look. We are right here.'

Yes. I think the reason is that the Department doesn't really know whether it supports them or not, or at least, it doesn't articulate that. (Interview, 2005)

This study's informants have indicated that the single-sex schools (both selective and comprehensive) are a key asset in the public sector's attempt to stop the drift to non-government schools. The official rhetoric of diversity and pluralism has been contrasted with the silencing of the single-sex schools regarding their difference. It is appropriate, then, to ask where innovation originates in relation to, for example, school effectiveness, responsiveness to local communities, and gender-specific issues, as well as how inclusive and comprehensive the research response to these issues may be.

This study has also found that the single-sex schools (both selective and comprehensive) offer considerable support for the longstanding goals of public education. As discussed in this study, the comprehensive model has been associated with responsiveness to community needs and the promotion of social cohesion. The evidence from single-sex schools and this project's informants has been that gender selectivity in itself is no threat to such goals and that these institutions constitute a part of the public provision that is highly effective in this regard.

9.2.4 What does the future look like for these schools?

According to Riordan (2002, p.26), 'ultimately the politics of education dictate the future of single-sex schools.' The findings of this study have demonstrated that the policy making process as it relates to single-sex education is still characterised by longstanding ideological division rather than evidence-based consideration of the local provision. In this sense, the single-sex option remains an interesting phenomenon but one whose controversial nature appears to place restrictions on the debate. A Sydney newspaper article identifies some of the issues.

So many educational debates come down to the conflicting ambitions of academic achievement and social engineering. This one is no exception. Some girls achieve more when they do not have the opposite sex to distract them, but educational bureaucrats hold devoutly to the doctrine of co-education, and so academic considerations take second place (*The Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 2004, p. 11).

Other key figures also point to single-sex education as a political minefield.

From my observations, the schools are in a situation where if they have the human and financial resources to market themselves effectively, they do. So some have snazzy websites and nice publicity material and some are really emphasising their separate gender status, all without any overarching ...

Without the imprimatur of the Department.

Yes.

The Department is not saying no, but it is also not saying 'That's terrific.' The Department at the moment is not really sure what it should be doing. Do we support diversity? Those statements are generally not made.

So even in an educational climate marked by concerns about boys' education, where the whole notion of single-sex education is regaining attention, in the US and elsewhere as well, why wouldn't the DET want to acknowledge and publicise this group as doing some very fine work?

I think they do. They say yes, it's good, but the Department has to work with a whole group of people who support the comprehensive, co-education model and get upset if you articulate any support for single-sex education.

Is that so? I have looked through so many documents from the Department, including all those on gender equity and various topics that have come out since the 1970s and there is no reference to the single-sex schools as a group or individually. There is simply no analysis of why those schools might be producing a very successful product, if you like, or why they might be a sound alternative for some children ...

But you see, if Ministers of Education leap up and say single-sex education is terrific they incur the wrath of a whole group of powerful people who say no, comprehensive co-education is the answer.

So there is still considerable ideological resistance to differentiation?

Well, you have picked some of it up, in saying that some of the local schools are really very resentful of the single-sex and the selective schools. It's true politically, so government departments of education adopt a position of being seen to support the comprehensive coeds but at the same time they are not threatening to single-sex education or selective education, because they are clearly successful.

I suppose that is my question. Why won't the bureaucracy actually point to them specifically and say look how well this is working and it is within public education.

It is because they would incur the wrath of those who don't think it is good. Politically, it is just not worth it. Politics is often about keeping the greatest number of people happy. (Interview, 2005)

The result of such controversy has been a failure to appreciate the uniqueness of this provision and its potential to inform education policy-making. However, as Spaul (1998, p.8) maintains, 'public education is not a fixed or unchanging concept. It has been reshaped a number of times over the past 150 years or more in response to the

prevailing social, political and economic environments.’ The findings of this study indicate that current consumer preferences favour the retention of the single-sex public schools, and that the level of support for the more successful models makes a case for increased access. In this sense, consumer support for the single-sex option may provide the most powerful impetus for a reconsideration of its value. According to one former Director-General of Education, it is essential that education policy become more accountable and responsive.

In Australia, as in many other countries, we can no longer afford to rest on much of the education policy-making processes of the past. This view does not envisage a context where there is no concern for issues such as equity, and no opportunity for diversity and choice. On the contrary, this view recognises that there will continue to be *some* conflicts in philosophy ... To maximise effectiveness within limited resources education must be geared to respond to changes within a framework of widely agreed, relatively constant and consistent longer term objectives. Education would inevitably seek goals which idealistic and materialistic and planning must encompass both elements. To enlist durable community support it is essential to provide the same community with meaningful information about how policies are arrived at and implemented. (Winder, 1991, p. 3)

In the opinion of one retired senior bureaucrat, education authorities find themselves in a philosophical quandary as they attempt to reconcile the past with the present.

The Wyndham Scheme was based on an ideal and it was never going to work in our current environment. I mean, if all you had was one system, if you genuinely had only one system of education, then the ideal would be to have comprehensive, co-educational schools. But once you have a federal funding system that supports diversity through the non-government system, then everything opens up and you cannot have one sector – the government sector – saying everything should look the same and other sectors saying ‘Tell us what you want and we will give it to you.’ It’s almost absurd to suggest that that is the way we could go. That is not to say that the philosophy behind the comprehensive, coed schools is not wonderful. It is. But when you’ve got choice, you cannot have one section of the market saying everything should look like this and the others saying the opposite.

When you have a system where you own the marketplace, you can come up with a philosophy that you can implement, but when you come up with a philosophy that the rest of the world

has moved away from and suggest that everything should look like this, and yet the marketplace is clearly diverse and popular in being diverse, you cannot impose what people don't want. Society doesn't work that way. You have to look at the government system and ask what it should look like. If comprehensive, co-education is what people want, and in many parts it is, that's fine. In other parts it is not. (Interview, 2005)

The majority of the principals interviewed for this study see themselves as advocates for single-sex government schools, believing that this educational option has an important role to play not only in a competitive market but, more importantly, as a means of delivering effective education to both sexes when some students may be better suited to such a learning environment. According to one former Minister for Education, decisions regarding the single-sex schools need broad consultation with those who work in them.

The principals I've spoken to - serving principals of single-sex schools - all emphasize their awareness of being in a market, a schooling market, and that they believe that they have a role to play as single-sex institutions. Do you have a comment on that?

I'd have to bow to their thoughts on it. If their experience is that that's the way to go, that probably ought to be taken into consideration. I mean it's one reason why governments are reluctant to push things and say, whether you like it or not, this is the way things are going to be.

So it's that notion of reflecting the community's ...

Hopes. And I think the teaching staff too; their input into it is going to be important. (Interview, Bedford, 2004)

This study has found that there is no dedicated forum for the principals of single-sex schools to meet as a group, provide feedback to education authorities and contribute to policy-making. Such cross-fertilisation of ideas was recommended nearly twenty years ago.

Evidence of the effectiveness of such [single-sex] groupings is seen as ambiguous, and it is suggested that:

... the most constructive and helpful approach appears to be for co-educational and single-sex [settings] to learn from each other ... (NSW Government, 1989, p. 255)

A range of sources have given evidence that the single-sex schools have moved well beyond debates about equality and equity. Instead, these institutions offer different strategies for addressing the needs of students, without being tied to notions of identical provision. There is no evidence of lesser academic achievement as a result of gender separation, except in those communities that are also classified as disadvantaged. The data collected from this study strongly suggest that gender differences in achievement in some single-sex schools are due to the convergence of socio-cultural factors, not biology.

In the case of the NSW single-sex schools, their inclusion in a diverse system should, at a minimum, be underpinned by an explicit justification of their nature and role. The absence of such a rationale, as has been found in this study, highlights the education authorities' apparent philosophical and pedagogical uncertainty and contrasts this with the determination of consumers to gain access to this educational alternative. Without the imprimatur of the system, it is also difficult for consumers to see themselves as part of a broad approach. The result may be that they identify only with one school, rather than with public education generally.

A further complexity is present in the form of the discursive shift from concerns about girls to issues about boys' education. While few other Western nations question the practice of educating boys and girls together in public schools, much recent Australian research is motivated by perceptions of a decline in boys' academic achievement in contrast to increases in the participation and achievement of females at most levels and in most subject areas in both the compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling (West, 2004; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Martin, 2002; DETYA, 2000; MacDonald et al, 1999). Francis (2000, p.4) maintains that '[i]f we are to believe the impression given by the media, any gender disadvantage previously experienced by girls has now been transferred to boys...' She echoes the findings of Arnot et al (1999) that girls' improved retention and participation rates since the 1970s and 1980s have somehow been turned into a problem, rather than being the cause for celebration and incentive for males to compete and excel. Connell (*The Australian*, 29 October 2002, p.13) comments that,

To the extent the current debate has been shifted back into a boys versus girls framework, it is damaging to education. Gender equity policy discussion has already moved beyond this dichotomous thinking, but it seems that some commentators on the issue haven't caught up.

Since 2001 the Federal Government has spent a great deal of money on studies relating to boys' education and in 2004 first expressed the intention of changing the Sex Discrimination Act to allow more scholarships to be awarded to men applying for teacher training and to enable schools to employ more male teachers (Landon, 2004).

In the early twenty-first century, attempts have been made to separate out specific groups of male and female underachievers, rather than relying on more general statements about gender differences. However, the Australian House of Representative's Standing Committee on Education and Training released its report into boys' education, concluding that, '[t]he assumption over recent decades appears to have been that girls have urgent educational needs and that boys will be all right. The committee believes that the evidence seriously challenges this assumption and believes change is essential' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). Some researchers consider this to be evidence of a general policy shift, using literacy as the focus, but in effect signalling an end to the intense policy emphasis on girls' education and ultimately leading to a devolution of policy development to the states and territories (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001; Hayes, 1998). According to Ailwood and Lingard (2001, p.10) 'changing political contexts across Australia, both the state and federal levels, have put feminist agendas on the defensive.' A shift in equity discourse has moved the focus 'from treating girls and boys *in relation* to girls, to treating girls and boys within a frame of presumptive equality' (p.19). This view holds that both sexes experience disadvantage in some way but require differential redress. This discursive shift, while useful in identifying which girls and which girls may be vulnerable to particular deficiencies in schooling, does not appear to have encouraged any increased focus on the capacity of single-sex schools to deliver effective educational programs. It is arguable that the current policy climate continues to emphasise comparisons between school types, rather than allowing an unbiased reconsideration of the single-sex option. While a few researchers have spent time in all-boys' schools their findings tend to focus on what coeducational campuses can do to address perceived weaknesses in the delivery of programs for boys. They do not present the single-sex

school in and of itself as a valid alternative within education systems. Carr-Gregg (2004), for example, claims that ‘boy-friendly schools acknowledge that boys learn differently from girls and seek to accommodate these differences’. On the other hand, the Australian Capital Territory’s Department of Education has rejected any notion of boys-only schools or single-sex classes, with the Minister saying he felt that ‘the fuss about boys’ education was a bit of a storm in a teacup (*The Canberra Times*, 24 July 2002, p.16).’ Like Western Australia and the Northern Territory, neither Queensland nor the ACT has single-sex government schools.

However, if, as Martino (2003, p.9) asserts, ‘[t]he whole notion of boys as the ‘new disadvantaged’ informs public debate about boys’ education’, there should be implications for the status of single-sex schools generally, and boys’ schools in particular. Following several decades of focused research and reporting on girls’ educational concerns, it is arguable that the all-boys’ public school has been marginalised as an option. If the dominant narrative is of boys’ underachievement, it is essential that the oversubscribed boys’ public schools (re)gain status in the educational discourse.

As mentioned in earlier sections, much past policy in Australia appears to have been inspired by material from other English-speaking nations. With regard to single-sex public schools, the local experience of recent decades has far more closely resembled that of the United Kingdom. However, it is interesting to reflect on the changing policy context in the United States. Recent American studies have proposed reconsideration of the ban on single-sex education in schools (Arms, 2002; James, 2001; Carstensen, 1999; Bonnie, 1998; Fochtman, 1998; Heather, 1998; Fuller, 1997; Hamilton, 1997; Min, 1991; Gilroy, 1990). Fochtman, (1998, p.8) has undertaken a complex longitudinal study to measure gender-based education programs, based on the premise that ‘[t]here was and continues to be a need to study the way females and males learn both in a co-educational and single-sex environment, so educated policy decision can be based on data rather than politics and emotion.’ Similarly, Mael’s (1998) comprehensive review of the debate was stimulated by challenges to gender-segregated colleges and military institutions. While he cautions that there remain considerable legal obstacles in America, he advises that ‘the predominance of research certainly shows a role for single-sex schools (as an option if not a norm),

[but] much additional research is needed to clarify which individuals or target populations would gain most from such schooling' (p.121).

Several key informants point to the fact that the private sector has always offered extensive single-sex options for both boys and girls, and has presumably been able to address concerns about equity in recent decades, as reflected in a dramatic increase in enrolments. Successive state and federal documents promoting gender equity have not, however, incorporated the experiences of the single-sex public schools in their recommendations. It is possible that the tension created by traditional links between the words 'gender' and 'equity' may also mitigate against an increased research focus on the existing single-sex public school provision. After decades of enthusiastically embracing mixed-sex schooling, it may simply be too difficult to not only acknowledge, but promote, the existence of such a large number of schools that represent the opposite model.

On the basis of the data collected for this thesis, however, it is my considered view that the single-sex option should not only remain but should be the inspiration for renewed research into the way in which schools are organised to meet the needs of male and female students. Rather than positioning single-sex education as an option requiring philosophical and pedagogical justification, future research should include large-scale surveys of students, teachers and communities to determine the level and nature of their support for single-sex and coeducational alternatives. The findings should be made available to consumers and inform policy-making in relation to the provision of both school types and the development of educational programs for all students.

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Appendix A: The State's Top 50

- 1 James Ruse Agricultural High School
- 2 Baulkham Hills High School
- 3 Sydney Boys High School
- 4 Sydney Grammar School
- 5 North Sydney Girls High School
- 6 Pymble Ladies College
- 7 Sydney Girls High School
- 8 Barker College
- 9 North Sydney Boys High School
- 10 St George Girls High School
- 11 Hornsby Girls High School
- 12 Hurlstone Agricultural High School
- 13 Fort Street High School
- 14 St Ignatius College
- 15 Abbotsleigh
- 16 Moriah College
- 17 Merewether High School
- 18 Killara High School
- 19 Gosford High School
- 20 Cherrybrook Technology High
- 21 Oakhill College
- 22 Loreto Kirribilli
- 23 SHORE, Sydney Church of England Grammar
- 24 Sydney Technical High School, Bexley
- 25 MLC Burwood
- 26 Ravenswood School for Girls
- 27 Knox Grammar School
- 28 St Francis Xavier's College
- 29 Northern Beaches Secondary College, Manly Selective Campus
- 30 Normanhurst Boys High School
- 31 Penrith High School
- 32 Ascham School
- 33 Newington College
- 34 Presbyterian Ladies College
- 35 Girraween High School
- 36 SCEGGS Darlinghurst
- 37 Cranbrook School
- 38 Canberra Grammar School
- 39 Trinity Grammar School
- 40 St Joseph's College
- 41 Caringbah High School
- 42 Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College
- 43 Kambala
- 44 St Aloysius College
- 45 Sefton High School
- 46 Smith's Hill High School
- 47 Cheltenham Girls High School
- 48 Santa Sabina College
- 49 Tara Anglican School for Girls
- 50 MacKillop Senior College, Port Macquarie

(Source: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 December 2006, p.5)

The *Herald* analysis ranks schools according to the percentage of students who scored 90 or above in at least one subject, taking into account the school's size. These schools had a minimum of 20 students sitting the HSC. Two smaller schools that also scored well were Taylors College (13 students) and Pittwater House Girls College (6 students).

(Source: NSW Board of Studies)

Appendix B: List of informants

Armstrong, Mary

Mature-age entrant into the teaching profession in 1956. First employed at Cremorne Girls High School as an Assistant, then moved to Hornsby Girls High School in 1962. Returned to Cremorne GHS as Head Teacher, English and History and then transferred back to Hornsby GHS as Deputy Principal. In 1976 went to Manly Girls High School as Principal, oversaw the transition to coeducation and the establishment of Freshwater High School. In 1986 appointed Principal of Forest High School until retirement in 1991.

Bedford, Eric

Primary-trained teacher who spent eleven years in one-room country schools. Moved into secondary teaching, starting at Liverpool Boys High School in 1958 as a teacher of Geography and Economics. Appointed to Bankstown Girls High School as Head Teacher. Retired from teaching to begin a political career in 1968 and became New South Wales Minister for Education in 1976 under a Labor Government. Held the position until 1980 and again between February 1984 and April 1984.

Buchan, Arthur

Attended Bankstown Primary School in the 1930s, which was divided into single-sex streams for boys and girls. Began teaching at North Sydney Boys High School in 1947, taking leave after six months to tour overseas with the Wallabies rugby team. Appointed to Parramatta High School in 1949, the only fully coeducational high school of the period. Moved to Murwillumbah High School in regional New South Wales, then appointed as Head of Science to East Hills Boys High School (1957-1960). Took on the role of Inspector of Schools for the South Coast and Southern Tablelands until 1965. Spent 1966 in India on a UNESCO program. Senior Inspector and member of Board of Secondary Schools and Senior Secondary Studies until appointment as Director of Secondary Education from 1971 to 1973. Assistant Director-General, 1973-1977 and Deputy Director-General from 1977 to 1984.

Burnswoods, Jan (The Honourable)

Graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in history, and Diploma of Education. Appointed to Wiley Park Girls High School (1972-1973). Tutored in history at the University of Melbourne and University of New South Wales and was employed in the History Unit of the NSW Department of Education from 1974 to 1991, when she was elected to the New South Wales Parliament.

Cavalier, Rodney

Minister for Education, 1984-1988

Cavenagh, Ray

Completed high school in country New South Wales, trained as a primary teacher and began work in 1957. In 1985 he was elected Deputy President of the NSW Teachers' Federation, a position he held under three Presidents through to his retirement in 1995.

Fleming, Lillian

Completed secondary education in the 1950s in coeducational school on New South Wales north coast. Trained as a mathematics teacher. First appointment was to Muswellbrook High School and then moved to Kempsey High School. Moved to Sydney and taught at Macarthur Girls High School, St George Girls High School and Sydney Girls High School. Served as Principal at Fairfield Girls High School and Macarthur Girls High School.

George, Jennie (The Honourable)

Graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Arts and from the Sydney teachers' College with a Diploma of Education. Taught in secondary schools. Served as General Secretary of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation (NSWTF) from 1980 to 1982 and was the first woman elected Vice President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1987. Served as President of the NSWTF 1986-1989, Assistant secretary ACTU 1991-1996 and President of the ACTU 1996-2000. Member of the House of Representatives for the federal seat of Throsby (NSW) since 2001.

Guthrie, Eula

Graduate of St George Girls High School, one of Australia's oldest selective single-sex government high schools, where she also spent time on the teaching staff. Graduated with Honours from the University of Sydney and taught English and History in city and country schools, including single-sex and coeducational, comprehensive and selective institutions. Appointed in 1964 to the NSW Department of Education's Inspectorate and worked statewide as well as having a small group of city schools under her supervision. Guthrie's experience in the United Kingdom earned her a British teaching certificate and she undertook study in the United States as a Fulbright scholar. When she retired in 1984 she was the longest serving female Regional Director in the history of the NSW Department of Education.

Harris, Nancye

Attended country schools until matriculation and graduated from the University of Sydney as a teacher of English and History. Served in country and city high schools as well as overseas. Appointed to Macarthur Girls High School as Special Mistress. Moved to Fairfield Girls High School in 1971 as Deputy Principal, and promoted to Blacktown Girls High School as Principal in 1974. Transferred to Cheltenham Girls High School as Principal in 1977 and retired from there in 1987.

Laughlin, Alan (Dr)

Taught at Birrong Boys High School and North Sydney Boys High School. Served as NSW Deputy Director-General Schools. Appointed to lead the Futures Project for the NSW Department of Education and Training and retired from this position in 2005.

Swan, Doug

Graduated as a primary teacher from Sydney Teachers' College in 1945 and served over fifteen years in country schools, including an appointment at the age of 29 to a school at which he led the integration of Aboriginal students. He was appointed to the role of NSW Deputy Director of Primary Education in the early 1970s, with special responsibility for staffing and accommodation. After a few years as Director of Primary Education, he was appointed Director-General in 1977, also serving on the Schools Commission and the NSW Education Commission. He is the only person in the history of NSW public education to have occupied every level of the service.

Winder, Robert

Trained as a primary teacher and served in regional New South Wales before taking on secondary teaching, including positions as teacher-librarian and art teacher. Moved to Sydney to study at the National Art School and gained further tertiary qualifications. Appointed as an Inspector and traveled throughout the state on secondary panels. Appointed as professional assistant to Director-General David Verco (1969-1972), then promoted to Assistant Director-General, Deputy Director-General and served as New South Wales Director-General of Education from 1985 to 1988.

Appendix C: Interviews with historical informants – guiding questions

1. Could you please describe your career in education?
2. What are your views on the existence of such a large group of single-sex schools within the New South Wales system?
3. In philosophical and pedagogical terms, where did these schools fit into the system after the middle of the last century? And today?
4. Some participants in this research project have described the 46 contemporary single-sex government schools as an 'historical anomaly' and 'unfinished business'. Why do you think they have survived?
5. What is your understanding of government policy, if any, that refers to the provision of single-sex schools within the public system?
6. What, if any, Departmental policies guided the operations of single-sex schools?
7. Were they considered to be a discrete group or as essentially similar to the coeducational secondary schools?
8. Were there differences between the boys' and girls' schools? (Philosophy? Pedagogy? Funding? Staffing?)
9. Do you know anything about the Twin School plan that was introduced in the 1950s?
10. What were the main reasons for the changes to single-sex education in the 1970s and 1980s?
11. How do you think decisions were reached regarding the single-sex schools?
12. Which single-sex schools stand out to you in terms of their closure, restructuring or survival?
13. Do you think that all of the single-sex schools are equal?
14. Who supports the schools? Old Boys and Old Girls? Politicians? Communities?
15. Are you aware of criticism of single-sex education within the public system?
16. Was any reference ever made to educational research in terms of decisions about single-sex schools?
17. To what extent do you think principals, teachers and other interest groups have traditionally been consulted about educational policy?
18. To your knowledge, has parental choice ever been the subject of surveys by the Department?
19. Do you believe that the single-sex schools could face challenges in the future?
20. Why do you think that the DET does not identify the single-sex schools as a group, as for example, the Sports High Schools, Technology High Schools and Performing Arts High Schools?
21. Where do you think the whole concept of single-sex education sits in a philosophical sense within public education?
22. To what extent do you think educational policy reflects community attitudes?
23. Do the single-sex schools represent choice for parents?
24. Is there a role for single-sex schools in today's educational climate?
25. Can you recommend any historical records or other sources that could add to the story of single-sex education in New South Wales?
26. Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix D: Interviews with principals – guiding questions

1. How long have you been associated with the school?
2. Could you please describe the school? (e.g. size, demographic details, nature of the community)
3. What other educational choices are there for parents in this area?
4. Apart from the single-sex nature of the school, does it have any special features that you would like to mention?
5. Does the school place particular emphasis on the single-sex nature of the place as far as advertising is concerned?
6. Do you know why it came to be a single-sex school?
7. Do you know why it has endured as a single-sex school?
8. Has this ever been in jeopardy?
9. Can you think of any specific policy statements by the DET that address the existence of the single-sex government schools?
10. Where do you think this group of schools fits in philosophical terms within the government system?
11. How is your school similar to, or different from, other single-sex secondary schools within the New South Wales public education system?
12. Do the principals of the single-sex schools have any special links, or regular meetings or coordinated activities, due to the specific nature of their schools?
13. Why do you think parents and students choose this school? Have parents talked about their choices? Is it a conscious choice?
14. Who supports the school? Would you say that there are active groups associated with the school, such as P&C, Old Boys or Old Girls, sporting or fundraising groups?
15. What support or lack thereof do you perceive exists in our society for single-sex government schools? Why do you think they have endured in New South Wales in such numbers?
16. What challenges could single-sex schools face in the future?
17. Is there anywhere else that I could obtain information about the school, such as historical records or publications, other than the material the school makes available now?
18. Can you identify any individuals who would be well placed to discuss the contemporary and/or historical nature of the school? (parent representatives or alumnae/alumni or others)
19. Is there anything you would like to add?

See print copy for Appendix E

Appendix F: The single-sex public high schools of New South Wales

Full name	Location	Selective	Boys/Girls
Ashfield Boys High School	Ashfield	no	boys
Asquith Girls High School	Asquith	no	girls
Auburn Girls High School	Auburn	no	girls
Balgowlah Boys High School	Balgowlah	no	boys
Bankstown Girls High School	Bankstown	no	girls
Belmore Boys High School	Belmore	no	boys
Beverly Hills Girls High School	Beverly Hills	no	girls
Birrong Boys High School	Birrong	no	boys
Birrong Girls High School	Birrong	no	girls
Blacktown Boys High School	Blacktown	no	boys
Blacktown Girls High School	Blacktown	no	girls
Burwood Girls High School	Croydon	no	girls
Canterbury Boys High School	Canterbury	no	boys
Canterbury Girls High School	Canterbury	no	girls
Cheltenham Girls High School	Beecroft	no	girls
East Hills Boys High School	Panania	no	boys
East Hills Girls High School	Panania	no	girls
Epping Boys High School	Eastwood	no	boys
Farrer Memorial			
Agricultural High School	Tamworth	yes	boys
Georges River College (Hurstville Boys Campus)	Hurstville	no	boys
Georges River College (Penshurst Girls Campus)	Penshurst	no	girls
Granville Boys High School	Granville	no	boys
Homebush Boys High School	Homebush	no	boys
Hornsby Girls High School	Hornsby	yes	girls
James Cook Boys High School	Kogarah	no	boys
Liverpool Boys High School	Liverpool	no	boys
Liverpool Girls High School	Liverpool	no	girls
Macarthur Girls High School	Parramatta	no	girls
Mackellar Girls High School	Manly Vale	no	girls
Macquarie Boys High School	Parramatta	no	boys
Moorefield Girls High School	Kogarah	no	girls
Normanhurst Boys High School	Normanhurst	yes	boys
North Sydney Boys High School	Crows Nest	yes	boys
North Sydney Girls High School	Crows Nest	yes	girls
Punchbowl Boys High School	Punchbowl	no	boys
Randwick Boys High School	Randwick	no	boys
Randwick Girls High School	Randwick	no	girls
Riverside Girls High School	Gladesville	no	girls
St George Girls High School	Kogarah	yes	girls
Strathfield Girls High School	Strathfield	no	girls
Sydney Boys High School	Surry Hills	yes	boys
Sydney Girls High School	Surry Hills	yes	girls
Sydney Technical High School	Bexley	yes	boys
Wiley Park Girls High School	Punchbowl	no	girls
Willoughby Girls High School	Willoughby	no	girls