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6<sup>th</sup> March 2001

Mr James Rees  
Inquiry Secretary  
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and  
Workplace Relations  
Parliament House  
**CANBERRA ACT 2600**

Dear Mr Rees,

My husband, Major General Digger James made a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Boys' Education last year – your letter of 13<sup>th</sup> July 2000 refers.

Enclosed please find copy of a newspaper article (Courier Mail, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2001) by the Courier Mail education reporter Mr Malcolm Cole. I believe, his article is well-balanced and is best summarized by the last four paragraphs of his article.

I am very disturbed at the attitude taken by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Msss Susan Halliday, as reported by Mr Cole, in her submission made to your Inquiry.

My concern is simply that Msss Halliday gives an extremely unbalanced position of the work done by Miss Mulligan to help young boys improve their literacy. Clearly, Msss Halliday is blinded by her overt feminist bias in an attempt to overturn what appears to be an excellent programme.

From a person, well paid and commissioned to provide the best, and presumably unbiased, advice on discrimination amongst the Australian population, I find it extraordinary that Msss Halliday now wishes to discriminate against young boys gaining better skills in literacy and secondly, in objecting to fathers, or other males, helping their sons in this endeavour.

Yours sincerely,



Mrs Barbara James

Encl.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2001

# Fixing classroom inequality

**A** YEAR 6 boy from Rangeville State School in Toowoomba wrote to me last year and asked me to come to his classroom and read.

His teacher, the letter said, had devised a programme for the boys in her care called "Real Men Read", and each boy had to invite one of his male role models to come and read a book to the class.

That he chose a complete stranger because I "wrote an article for the newspaper about our school" speaks volumes for the importance of the programme.

Teacher Deborah Mulligan, in a one-woman literacy campaign, devised Real Men Read to cajole the boys in her class to find enjoyment in books or magazines or newspapers.

It was not an admission that her skills as a teacher were somehow deficient, or that the message would have more mean-



Malcolm Cole  
education reporter

ing if delivered by a man. It was, however, clear recognition that it is better to show rather than merely to instruct.

But the approach has come under fire from Sex Discrimination Commissioner Susan Halliday who has attacked the notion that boys will learn to read by example from other men.

In a submission to a federal parliamentary inquiry on boys' education, Halliday said the Australian community "has a long way to go if it believes boys

will only see learning as important if the message is passed on by men".

"This is a major cultural problem where one gender is considered of greater worth than the other that we are identifying, efforts to deal with it, rather than schemes to foster it, should be our priority," Halliday said.

The point of bringing more males into the classroom is not, in any way, to counter some perceived weakness in the female teaching workforce.

Female teachers are indisputably the backbone of our school system, particularly in the primary years. But little boys in Australia grow up in an environment that actively discourages academic success. From an early age their peers let them know that girls are good at school work and boys are good at sport.

No amount of urging by a teacher will reverse that attitude. Educators such as

Mulligan hope that perhaps a few active examples might go some of the way.

Halliday disputed the idea that there was a problem with boys' education or that, as a group, boys are "deserving of specialised attention".

She said that, contrary to popular opinion, boys had not fallen behind recently, but had actually trailed their female counterparts for more than 100 years. The implication of this point is that, because it is a historical trend it can be ignored. It would be interesting to mount that argument in favour of ignoring other long-standing examples of sex-based disadvantage in our society.

The fact is that boys do not perform as well as girls in literacy tests, and the disparity grows as a cohort of students moves through the education system.

Girls suffer when it comes to numeracy, albeit to a lesser extent. Boys have

higher school drop-out and expulsion rates and, at the end of Year 12, girls dominate the top OP rankings while boys dominate the bottom rankings.

Being a boy is not an automatic ticket to failure in literacy, but it is a clear factor. It works most severely when it intersects with other factors of disadvantage.

As groups, Aboriginal students, those in rural areas and those from non-English speaking backgrounds all tend to fare poorly in literacy tests compared with the rest of the population. So do boys when compared with the rest of the population, that is, girls.

Education systems rightly devote vast resources to fix literacy problems among the first three groups. It would be ludicrous for them to ignore the fourth group - boys - under threat of being labelled discriminatory.

It is right that a parliamentary com-

mittee should examine the issues around boys' education. The economic and social future of about half the Australian population is at stake if we get it wrong.

As the commissioner correctly points out, the inquiry should not be blind to the issues confronting girls at school.

Halliday's submission concludes by asking the inquiry to acknowledge that, despite superior performance at school, females are subject to "far higher levels of discrimination and harassment" in the employment arena.

Discrimination and lack of opportunity are not acceptable in any sphere. But that they exist for women in the workplace is no good reason to destroy, through inaction, the lives of innocent schoolboys.

If an uneven playing field is worth fixing in the workforce - and, undoubtedly, it is - then it is worth fixing in the classroom, too.