

# JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 8 Number 2

Fall 2012

Editor  
Lindy L. Johnson

<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

---

## *A Review of Invisible Girls: At Risk Adolescent Girls' Writing Within and Beyond School.*

Lesley, Mellinee. (2012) *Invisible Girls: At Risk Adolescent Girls' Writing Within and Beyond School*. New York: Peter Lang. x + 152 pp. ISBN 978-1-4331-1493-9, \$33.95 (paperback).

Stephanie Anne Shelton  
The University of Georgia

Please cite this review as: Shelton, S.A. (2012). A Review of Invisible Girls: At Risk Adolescent Girls' Writing Within and Beyond School. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 8(2), 78-83. Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Review-of-Invisible-Girls.pdf>

A 2008 study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that “[d]espite the vast literature on education, analysis of gender differences within racial/ethnic and income groups is surprisingly uncommon,” and that fewer than 0.1% of more than 3,000 education articles considered gender, race/ethnicity, and class as collective factors in school success. Mellinee Lesley’s book, describing her 3.5 year study of 24 middle school girls, all of whom were identified as African American or Latina “low-income students” (p. 9), at-risk for “dropping out of school” (p. 10), responds to this glaring void in education research.

Lesley introduces her work by explaining that “the purpose for this book is to offer educators resources for teaching writing to the considerable number of adolescent girls who are struggling unnoticed in classrooms and invisibly being failed by the public education system in the United States” (p. 4). The study seeks to empower disenfranchised girls through writing, and specifically through providing them with what Lesley terms “Third Space,” a writing space that acknowledges and values the realities of the girls’ school and community lives, while “remaining separate” (p. 2).

Lesley’s book is a hybrid of theory and practice. She begins by grounding her research methodology and analysis in socio-cultural theory (Gee, 2005; Lesley, 2012, p. 141), critical literacy (Freire, 1995; Lesley, 2012, p. 16), feminist critical literacy (Lewis, 1993; Luke & Gore, 1992; Lesley, 2012, p. 16), and feminist post-structuralism (Weedon, 1994; Lesley, 2012, p. 68). Because Lesley’s intended audience is practicing teachers who may or may not have strong theoretical backgrounds, each time that she introduces a theoretical position, she not only explains how it informs her research, but how it applies to student populations similar to her study’s. For example, she explains, “Feminist post-structural theories view gender as a socially constructed phenomenon where patriarchal ideologies and values are presented as ‘common sense,’” and then applies the concept: “Feminist post-structural theories help to explain the manner in which adolescent girls learn what it means to act and think in ways that identify them as females” (p. 68). Considering that Lesley is hoping to share her work with teachers, explaining theories’ concrete applications is important, and she successfully explains concepts that might be unfamiliar to some readers, in accessible language.

The practice-based element of Lesley’s book is less helpful to educators, however. Each chapter begins with a participant’s profile, which helps readers to get to know many of the girls Lesley worked with during the study, and each chapter ends with a vignette explaining how the content of the chapter directly influenced or played out for one of the girls. One problem is that some of the strategies Lesley proposes do not seem to produce the intended results, leaving readers unsure of why those practices might be successful for them.

An example, in Chapter Five, focuses on Tara, “an African American girl [... whom the] campus coordinator referred to as a ‘queen bee’ and tried to help her learn to control her anger, which had a way of unexpectedly bursting forth in off-handed and bitter confrontations” (p. 81). Third Space, as Lesley conceives it, allows students like Tara to write in an environment safely

removed from her usual spaces, such as home and school (p. 2). One of the primary goals of creating such a space is to use the writing in the Third Space to give the girls agency that they do not generally have in their other spaces, inside or outside school. Such an opportunity for a student like Tara, labeled an angry troublemaker in her other spaces, would seem ideal for the project. However, while the other girls compose a poem about Tara that references her constant stays in in-school suspension (p. 82), the writing that Tara produces reinforces traditional gender roles and celebrates her aggressive actions towards others (p. 83). Attempting an intervention, Lesley introduces self-celebratory and self-empowering poetry, such as Eloise Greenfield's "By Myself," for the group to read, but ultimately, the "campus coordinator took Tara out in the hall to talk to her about her behavior," and other girls leave the group (p. 91). The issue here is not whether or not writing can be helpful to disempowered students; the issue is whether or not this particular concept of Third Space writing is beneficial enough to justify the time and resources other teachers would have to devote to it, to gain from the strategies Lesley is offering.

Lesley closes this particular chapter with the seeming overstatement that "Writing offered the girls a path out of the anger they felt" (p. 97). Several of the girls do indeed express anger in their writing, including Tara, but there seems no real element of agency or action. In fact, in the chapter's closing vignette, Lesley learns that after the study, Tara was removed from a church youth group because she "was fighting with one of the other girls in the group and through this fighting had split the entire youth group" (p. 99). While it is reasonable to assume that Tara grew as a writer, because Lesley can trace Tara's annual efforts to write more, both literally and introspectively, the book does not convincingly demonstrate the girls', and specifically Tara's, success at using writing in the metacognitive way that Lesley describes.

Another concern regarding the practical implementation of Lesley's practices is related to the testing culture that dominates education today. In Georgia alone, where I am a doctoral student, there is a minimum of four high-stakes writing tests (Georgia Department of Education, 2012). Lesley is right that, in such a standards-based school culture, "transformative or meaningful writing instruction for adolescent girls [...] has not become a central concern of literacy pedagogy in schools or curriculum" (p. 46), and that "[a]lthough these standards and exams are designed to ensure student success in writing, they did little in the way of improving interest in academic writing for adolescent girls in the writing group" (p. 49). Ultimately, Lesley and the girls decide that "writing required for school and specifically for test preparation seemed always to be an irrelevant chore and in ways even an obstacle to the girls' writing development" (p. 49).

I am a former high school English teacher, and my own teaching experiences bear out Lesley's assertions. The problem is that Lesley's strategies seem highly unrealistic for standard classrooms. For starters, in the Third Space writing group, "revision was virtually nonexistent" and girls often received little or no feedback due to their sensitivity to constructive criticism (p. 56). Few schools do not require that students learn to revise writing, and helping students learn to revise appropriately requires actually reading and discussing the students' writing with them.

In addition, Lesley found peer editing problematic, stating, “It took two years to get to a place where the girls could begin to respond to one another’s writing without making fun of each other” (p. 57). When I was a classroom teacher, I had larger groups of students in each class period than Lesley had overall, with over 50% identified as female, over 70% classified as racial/ethnic minorities, and 100% classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, for the purposes of Adequate Yearly Progress measurements, for No Child Left Behind. My students often peer edited, with great successes and improvements in their writing. And, while I do agree wholeheartedly with Lesley that all students, and perhaps especially “adolescent girls need to feel a level of trust with peers and teachers in order to develop as writers” (p. 39) and facilitate peer editing, few teachers have the luxury of building that trust over the two years that Lesley required in her study.

However, the problematic elements of the study do not mean that the research and suggestions that Lesley offers are not valuable to all teachers. Lesley’s final two chapters, Chapters 7 and 8, offer important insight into ways that teachers can understand and use digital literacies to improve student writing, and ways that school can “foster a hybrid between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices” (p. 135). In Chapter 7, Lesley first dispels common myths regarding technology as a detriment to student writing. Some teachers bemoan the effects that texting has on spelling, for example, and Lesley discusses the ways that text language is “necessary for [the girls’] participation in peer Discourse communities” (p. 123). Lesley points out that “girls who struggled with conventions of academic writing did so prior to their participation in online and digital forums” (p. 128). Because the girls fully understand the concept of code switching between school language and other forms of communication, their use of digital media does not limit their language usages in the ways that teachers normally assume, but instead gives them some a means of power and expression that their language skills had not allowed for before (pp. 120-121).

And, while educators should not demonize technology, Lesley insists that they should not idealize it, either. In addition to digital literacy’s advantages, Chapter 7 also considers teachers’ responsibilities to students using technology, because, for students, “being technologically savvy did not automatically lead to sophisticated critical thinking skills” (p. 127). In her Third Space group, Lesley found that “the girls needed instruction in critically framing literacy practices on the Internet” (p. 129) and cites numerous other studies that discuss the contrasts between students’ assumed and real levels of critical digital literacy. Ultimately, Lesley finds that without critical literacy skills, digital literacy still restricted the girls’ agency “in resisting dominant and discriminatory ideologies” and therefore limited their true freedoms of expression through writing (p. 129).

Chapter 8 ends the book by reminding readers of Lesley’s work’s true purpose: to inform teachers of the very real reasons that girls like the ones in her study need and deserve to be empowered writers. Lesley states, “The girls’ daily experiences with sexual harassment, racism, and the expectations of stereotypic heterosexual gender roles were hegemonic narratives the girls

collectively—and in most instances individually—had not named as such prior to participating in the writing group” (p. 137). I am not convinced that the girls themselves left the study truly understanding that their writing often reinforced socially constructed stereotypical roles for them, but I am convinced that it was beneficial for them to be able to write about experiences, which Lesley interpreted for them as “hegemonic narratives.”

At the time that Lesley was finishing her work on the book, every girl that she highlighted was still in school, despite the district’s initial concerns that they would dropout. It is not evident that the Third Space writing group directly contributed to their success, but it is reasonable to believe that three sustained years of writing with and attention from Lesley were factors. Despite Lesley’s assertion that the book serves as a resource to guide writing teachers, it offers no clear strategies that can be linked to both the girls’ successes as writers and to the realistic constrictions of a typical classroom. However, the book does offer very valuable research and suggestions about adolescent girls’ writing and the very real obstacles that gender can present in American schools. Lesley’s book makes an important argument that all educators should read: low-income minority adolescent girls are not only invisible in education scholarship, but in classrooms, and as they struggle “unnoticed in classrooms,” they are “invisibly being failed by the public education system” (p. 4).

## References

- American Association of University Women. (2008). *Where the girls are: The facts about gender equity in education*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- Georgia Department of Education. (2012). Writing assessments. Retrieved from <http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Assessment/Pages/Writing-Assessments.aspx>
- Lesley, M. (2012). *Invisible girls: At risk adolescent girls' writing within and beyond school*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lewis, M. (1993). *Without a word: Teaching beyond women's silence*. New York: Routledge.
- Luke, C., & Gore, J. (1992). *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Weedon, C. (1994). *Feminist practice & poststructuralist theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.