

# JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 1

Spring 2013

Editor  
Lindy L. Johnson

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

---

## Review of *Reading girls: The lives and literacies of adolescents*.

Ma'ayan, H.D. (2012). *Reading girls: The lives and literacies of adolescents*. New York: Teachers College Press, 160 pp., ISBN 0807753149, \$29.95 (paperback).

Michelle Falter  
The University of Georgia

Please cite this review as: Falter, M. (2013). A Review of *Reading girls: The lives and literacies of adolescents*. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 9(1). Available at <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Reading-girls-bk-rev-1.pdf>.

In her debut book, Hadar Dubowsky Ma'ayan writes about the struggles of six adolescent girls in finding their literacy identities within an urban public middle school. Using research from her dissertation at the University of New Mexico, Ma'ayan's book extends the discourse around girls' in and out-of-school literacies by exploring 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies that shape these girls' lives. This text adds to the growing evidence that girls' voices and reading identities are being silenced or unnoticed within the traditional English classroom.

Starting in 1992, the American Association of University Women's (AAUW) Educational Foundation reported that girls' needs were not being met by schools. Their study highlighted several ways that schools shortchanged girls. Shortly following this report, books like Mary Pipher's (1994) *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* found that girls were going through a self-esteem crisis, and schools were not helping. Ma'ayan's research in *Reading Girls* offers us an updated version of Margaret Finder's (1997) seminal piece *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*, which highlighted middle school girls' hidden literacies.

Many scholars have argued that girls' literacy has improved dramatically since these reports and books in the '90s; however, Ma'ayan's book comes at a particularly important time, as educational discourse has shifted focus away from the learner and towards high-stakes testing and standardized curriculum schemes. This book reminds us to listen to the youth whom current laws and policies ignore. It also highlights the fact that the voices of some girls are still being silenced, and unfortunately many schools and teachers don't even realize this is occurring. This is supported by a survey done by Zittleman (2007), where the overwhelming majority of 100 teachers responded that there were "no" gender issues in their schools. Finally, the book offers practical recommendations for teachers and parents to help take the research from theory into practice so that adolescent girls' literacies, particularly those not recognized by the dominant mainstream middle school culture, can be recognized and utilized by educators in the classroom.

*Reading Girls* is comprised of an introductory chapter and nine subsequent chapters revolving around six adolescent girls' literacy practices. Chapters 1-2 describe Ma'ayan's research participants, design and theoretical/conceptual frames for this study. Chapters 3-9 develop the themes and findings of her research by discussing the ways these girls navigated, used, critiqued, and consumed different types of texts in their lives. Each chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of these findings and recommendations for schools, teachers and policy makers. In her own words, Ma'ayan says that her aim in doing this research was to "understand what role literacies play in students' understanding of self and how we, as educators and parents, can use literacies to help girls, especially those marginalized in school, to build resiliency, self-agency, academic achievement, and personal growth" (p. 3).

In chapter one, Ma'ayan focuses on the research site, the discussion group she formed, and her role as a researcher. Using "naturalistic inquiry," Ma'ayan followed six 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls (Moniqua, Chris, Kaliya, Angela, Tetra, Erika) for almost a full school year. In addition to meeting with them weekly in a discussion group for 18 weeks during their language arts class, she also spoke with them individually, observed them, and collected both in-school and out-of-school artifacts of their literacy skills. Her study was done in the U.S. Southwest in a large diverse public urban middle school. She purposefully chose six girls who exemplified the diversity within the school in terms of race, class, academic achievement, level of participation in class (which she calls "voice") and other pertinent distinguishing information. In designing her research, she defines the word "text," as an ordered set of signs from which meaning can be constructed. This frees up Ma'ayan to look at "texts" that might not be considered if one used a more traditional definition that sees texts as composed of written words. Through this work, Ma'ayan discovers that the girls' relationships with texts is very complex, often shifting, based on context and content, and demonstrates at times a sophisticated understanding of the roles different texts have on their racial, gendered, sexual, and class identities. However, these demonstrated critical literacy practices rarely translated into success or recognition in the classroom for these girls.

Chapter two helps us to frame Ma'ayan's work on girls and literacies within a larger theoretical context.

The complexity of adolescent girls' literacy experiences seems to mirror the complexity of the theoretical frames Ma'ayan builds from. Ma'ayan draws upon quite a few traditions to inform her research; these include new literacies and multiple literacies perspectives, reader-response/transactional theory, sociocultural theory, feminist and post-modern theory, queer theory, social constructivist and critical theory. All of these theories offer different entry points for understanding how girls negotiate the complexities of literacy practices and affirm identities and connect with others; however, it is not entirely clear how they all work together.

Despite the overabundance of theoretical lenses in chapter two, chapter three highlights some interesting and hidden understandings about girls' complex relationship with texts. Monique, Erika and Tetra, three girls in this study, all used their bodies as a way to perform their race, class, and gender identities. Ma'ayan argues that these girls learned to read other bodies in the school to help them perform a certain identity of their own. Despite being from Iran, Monique performs a Hispanic identity. Despite being from the working poor, Erika performs a middle class identity to fit in with her peers. Tetra performs a White geek identity as a sort of counter-hegemony, because "as a tomboy, a fat girl, and a lesbian, Tetra held very little social capital but by performing as a geek she could maintain a position that was both radically and economically privileged" (p. 41). The value of this chapter is that it exposes a hidden curriculum that the girls are actively engaged in understanding, manipulating and critiquing for their advantage. Unfortunately, because these girls feel that their identities are not valid or valued, they have to perform identities that are more accepted within their schools.

In Chapter four, Ma'ayan discusses the role of mass media in the girl's lives. Interestingly, the findings here were mixed. At times, the girls were consumers of media texts, accepting the values and cultural stories, and at other times, they viewed them with a critical eye, resisting media's portrayal of how they should act and look. Furthermore, the girls sometimes used media to support their identities. These multiple approaches to understanding media texts were seemingly dependent upon context, content, and timing. In particular, this chapter focuses on magazines, music videos, and movies. Most of these literacies were not discussed in their classes, and the discussion group was one of very few places these girls were able to approach media with a critical eye. Ma'ayan urges teachers to find ways to break down the walls between in and out of school texts, so that students can have a place to have these critical conversations that have direct impact on student's beliefs and identity formation.

Chapters five and nine both cover similar topics, so they will be discussed together. In chapter five Ma'ayan explores the girls' interest in texts about sexuality. These include school and church texts, peer texts, and mother texts. Despite being warned by administrators not to discuss sex with the girls, Ma'ayan asserts that it was impossible not to engage in this dialogue because issues of teen pregnancy, sexual identity, and sexual expression were on their minds. This attempt at silencing and policing this topic is a powerful reminder and indicator that schools often thwart attempts to engage in dialogue around real issues important to teens. As Ma'ayan attests, "if students are to 'read' their worlds, then schools need to see the real lives of adolescents" (p. 59) and "if the body is a text, this struggle for control is parallel to the struggles of finding one's voice and reading one's world" (p. 68). The girls in this study found that both peers and mothers (as texts) were better sources to *read* about issues relating to sex than both school and church texts. Because schools silence and police sexual behavior and discussions, there is a genuine possibility that adolescents will not have the tools needed to negotiate this potential minefield.

Unfortunately, as *Reading Girls* shows, this leads to repercussions on girls' future achievements. This concept is discussed in chapter nine. The topic of teen pregnancy (as an extension of their talks on sexuality) and its connection to social class were seen as factors that influenced the types of future narratives the girls produced about themselves. Using Tetra and Erika's contrasting narratives about their future, Ma'ayan demonstrates how economic privilege was a significant factor influencing the texts they wrote about their futures. Despite efforts on the part of both sets of parents, Tetra was set up for success and Erika was set up for failure. This chapter gives educators strong evidence as to why the hidden curriculum and texts need to be put in the spotlight so that students like Erika can achieve.

Clearly, Erika touched Hadar Dubowsky Ma'ayan during her research. Erika's story and narrative could act as a metaphor for all girls who tragically slip through the cracks of our educational system each year. This may be why Erika was highlighted in many of the chapters of this book. Chapters six and eight were almost entirely focused on the ways in which Erika's literacy practices were not accepted by the school. Again, these chapters show a disconnect between in-school and out-of-school literacies. In chapter six, Ma'ayan investigates violence as a text in Erika's life. She had a "transactional relationship with [violence] as she sought to understand it, her relationship to it, and what it could teach her about herself in the world" (p. 74). In the discussion group, Erika's literacy skills around gang life and violence were considerable, yet in the classroom there was no opportunity for her to demonstrate her experience with navigating this text. Interestingly, Ma'ayan points out that often violence and violent texts are relegated to counselors who reinforce a class-based institutionalized silence in the classroom. In chapter eight, this concept of silence is explored in more detail.

As discussed in previous chapters, Erika demonstrated several literacies that were not part of the school culture. Because the school didn't understand the out-of-school and complex, intertextual, multiple, and hybrid texts in her life, the school framed her for failure with little to no support. Unfortunately, "Erika was left to develop her literacy on her own, perform more acceptable literate positions, and stay silent about her own meaning-making of the world around her" (p. 105). These two chapters, in particular, beg the question: is there room in our classes for voices and literacies like Erika's?

While Erika's story does give a very depressing and ominous assessment of how schools fail to recognize the marginalized voices and literacies of many of their students, there is some hope within *Reading Girls*. Chapter seven paints a positive picture of the ways adolescent girls used texts to build resiliency and self-agency. In this chapter, Ma'ayan discusses how technology (the internet and computers) and writing (multimodal poetry and fan fiction) provide opportunities for adolescents to access information, strengthen connections to marginalized and minority groups, support social interaction and peer relationship building, help develop personal identity, and create a space for their own voices to be heard so they can make meaning for themselves and the world. All of these literacy practices were done outside of school, which indicates that girls are doing literacies all the time, often in very positive ways.

In *Reading Girls*, Ma'ayan presents a portrait of early adolescent girls' experiences using a multitude of texts to make sense of themselves in the world. In doing so, she helps to both clarify and complicate the literature that informs her work. This book pushes the boundaries of this field of research on multiple literacies as it analyzes "technology and mass media, queer theory, gender expression and multiple sexualities, [and] deepening understandings of race and class" (p. 27). The intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality within the girl's literacy practices are evident in these case studies.

Furthermore, many educators, administrators and policy makers will also find the implication and recommendation sections of each chapter to be a useful resource in defining strategies to bring out-of-school literacies and those found within the school's hidden curriculum into the forefront within the classroom. However, while these suggestions are helpful, many are framed as generalizations, such as "teachers need to create a space for conversation" or teachers and administrators shouldn't "fear" talking about controversial topics. How to do this, however, is not addressed. And, while these assertions may be true, they tend toward proselytizing rather than providing concrete tips for educators to take away. Certainly, Ma'ayan does suggest book contracts, critical media analysis, and media production assignments as possible tools, but those searching for easy answers and quick fixes will be left disappointed.

Additionally, and interestingly, while Ma'ayan stresses the importance of creating spaces for marginalized girls' voices to be heard, *Reading Girls* really only highlights the voices of three of the six girls she studied. I kept wondering about Kaliya, Angela, and Chris. Out of these three, Chris got the least space, being mentioned only eight times in the book. What is her, and the other two girls', silenced story?

How did they understand and make meaning in their literacy practices? Clearly, Erika, Moniqua and Tetra's narratives were powerful, but it does beg the question as to why these other girls were not more equally represented.

Overall, though, *Reading Girls* presents many challenges to teachers, administrators, counselors, librarians, and policy makers. In the beginning of the book, Ma'ayan calls her book "dangerous" because it deviates from simple understandings of literacy and girl's lives, and it interrupts master narratives of what it means to be an adolescent. I would agree that this book is dangerous, but only if the stories and narratives of these six girls are not taken seriously.

### References

- Bailey, S., Burbidge, L., Campbell, P. B., Jackson, B., Marx, F., & McIntosh, P. (1992). The AAUW report: How schools shortchange girls. Washington, DC: *AAUW Education Foundation*.
- Finders, Margaret. (1997). *Just girls: Hidden literacies and life in junior high*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Pipher, M. B. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Zittleman, K. (2007). Gender perceptions of middle-schoolers: The good and the bad. *Middle Grades Research Journal*, 2(2), 65–98.