

6-17-2015

## Time to Talk: A Review of Reading Girls: The Lives and Literacies of Adolescents

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### Recommended Citation

Newhouse, Erica (2015) "Time to Talk: A Review of Reading Girls: The Lives and Literacies of Adolescents," *Networks: An Online Journal for Teacher Research*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2470-6353.1037>

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An On-line Journal  
for Teacher Research

## **Time to Talk: A Review of *Reading Girls: The Lives and Literacies of Adolescents***

**Reviewed by Erica Newhouse**

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Ma'ayan, H.D. (2012). *Reading girls: The lives and literacies of adolescents*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press

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Hadar Dubowsky Ma'ayan regards *Reading Girls: The Lives and Literacies of Adolescents* as an important extension of Finder's (1997) *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. Ma'ayan, a 5th grade teacher, conducts practitioner action research while taking a year off from teaching at Lincoln Middle School. Once a week, she met with a group of six racially and socioeconomically diverse 8th grade girls to participate in a Girls' Literacy Discussion Group (GLDG). All of the participants actively engaged in literacy activities; however, they were not all academically successful. The purpose of her research was to "understand what role literacies play in students' understandings 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 addition to the GLDG, she met with the participants individually, observed them in and out of class, and collected artifacts. She utilized a multiple literacies framework "to investigate their sites, modes, and forms of literacy practices" (p. 15). Ma'ayan's research demonstrates that using particular texts can facilitate honest discussions about subject matter helping to prepare students to meet life's challenges and to experience academic success.

In Chapter Three, Ma'ayan explores the body as a "text to communicate constructed identity" (p. 17). She describes how the participants read and performed markers such as music choices (e.g., dress, race, class and gender) to mark group affiliations. Chapter Four illustrates how the participants were influenced by mass media texts including music, movies, teen magazines, and corporate fashion. In Chapter Five, Ma'ayan explains how texts related to school, church, peers, and mothers contributed to the participants' understandings about sexuality. In Chapter Six, Ma'ayan explores violence as text. She found that the girls received mixed messages and had a limited ability to critically question the messages they receive.

This research reinforces how girls are marginalized and silenced in schools. The conversations they wanted and needed to have were considered "off-limits," or not appropriate for school. Ma'ayan recognized that teen pregnancy was a problem, and she described how female students were denied access to accurate information. In addition, female adolescents often suffered from low self-esteem but were not provided with the tools needed to interrogate the media messages that contributed to the lowered sense of self. These students' lives were difficult; their families and communities were often sites of conflict and violence. Yet,

teachers did not allow space for these conversations in classrooms.

Ma'ayan's research also showed how the girls used technology to develop "educational resiliency" (p. 84). In and out of school, they used the Internet to find information, connect with marginalized communities with whom they identified, and provide a creative outlet. The sites and the information they accessed allowed them to enter into worlds that reflected their race, ethnicity, and sexuality. Although some of their literacy practices are recognized as having educational value, Ma'ayan demonstrates that applying a multiple literacies framework valued a broader diversity of literacy practices and created pathways for educational success.

Ma'ayan urges teachers to recognize, understand, and be critical of the texts students encounter. There are many types of texts that contribute to adolescent girls' identity construction and understanding of issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Teachers need to address the use of media texts in the classroom and work toward "developing a critical discourse in response to texts" (p. 55). Drawing from De Abreu (2007), Ma'ayan identifies five areas necessary for media literacy development and understanding media texts. These include recognizing that messages are constructions, language is used creatively to create messages, people receive messages differently, messages carry value, and messages are used to create or maintain "profit and power" (p. 54).

Ma'ayan's research tackles the divide between students and teachers. Teachers create false distinctions between what they do and what they expect students to do. For example, teachers learn through interactions with others by sharing stories, knowledge, and experience. Yet, students are not offered this opportunity. Ma'ayan encourages teachers to make space for discussions of taboo topics. Through literacy instruction, including a wider range of what counts as text and literacy practices, teachers can provide girls

with tools and skills to benefit them both personally and academically.

Ma'ayan states that for marginalized students to be successful, it is necessary to "de-center the White-middle class experience" (p. 123). She puts this power in the hands of classroom teachers; however, there are deeper underlying issues. In order to make changes that deconstruct the hidden curriculum, teachers must be able to identify it, recognize the role they have in perpetuating the hidden curriculum, and learn how to interrupt it. As most teachers are White and middle-class, this is an extremely complex process. In order to accomplish this, teacher education programs should include opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore their positionalities, privileges, and ideologies. However, recognizing these on an intellectual level does not ensure that they carry over into instructional practice.

Another underlying issue is the assumption that lies beneath Ma'ayan's research that teachers are ready to facilitate classroom discussions about difficult topics related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and violence. While conducting her research, Ma'ayan encountered a teacher who was upset that she and the girls were discussing sexuality. After the teacher took her concerns to the administration, Ma'ayan said she had to "watch my back" (p. 58). There were others in the building who did not think these topics were appropriate for school, and Ma'ayan's work with students and research could be jeopardized. This situation illustrates two problems. First, it illustrates the institutionalized silencing of teachers. The second problem involves individual teacher's belief systems. The topics that might arise during difficult discussions may conflict with their personal, political, or religious beliefs or even educational philosophies. However, this does not give teachers a free pass. This is another component of teacher education - how to allow teachers to keep their beliefs intact while preparing them to incorporate these topics and strategies into their practice. Again, this is a very complex problem.

This text offers a snapshot of what is happening in classrooms throughout the country. Its value lies in providing specific examples of how race, class, gender, and sexuality can create obstacles for marginalized students and offering recommendations for teachers. Teachers, students, and parents all benefit from a curriculum that creates a network of supports

addressing obstacles that often contribute to adolescent girls' alienation from school and subsequent failure to graduate. In order for students to be successful, teachers must teach the entire student, not ask them to check their bodies and lives at the door.