

Invisible Girls



At Risk Adolescent
Girls' Writing Within
and Beyond School

MELINEE LESLEY

Introduction

Four years ago, I began a voluntary writing group with adolescent girls through a program in a middle school designed to provide services to students deemed to be at risk for dropping out of school. My introduction to the girls' writing consisted of brief entries in journals scattered over a few pages and days in the group such as the following examples:

*Hi my name is lataydra in I'm here 2 talk about how 2 Get A date with your daddy
Ist you have 2 see how he's going.*

*My day was good I guess you can say. I got to see my boyfriend since he was absent
yesterday. I got to see my friends also, they always have alot to say Now I'm here
writing in this journal. Not knowing what to say. I thought today was going to be
bad, but I guess it didn't. I'm glad that it didn't. So I guess I'll stop writing, so good-
bye.*

Today was a BORING day.

*I see that Angelica doesn't know how to comb her hair it on the top of her head
looks like she just got out of bed.*

Today was FUN because in PE we played hooky.

*As time goes by I see the past
I swish throu the sky as my grandma says good bye.
I turn to the side and wish she was still alive.
I cry to sleep asking why lord why.
Why did she have to say goodbye.*

Today was boring the only time I have fun is in 1st and 3rd period.

*Today wuz good I just did my work and talk to my friend it wuz a normal day then I
was thinking about Joe.*

*Today my day was boring. I didn't like my day very much. I was writing alot of
notes to my friends through Kecia gets on my nerves too.*

*When I see my mother cry I get sad and I feel guilt in me because I feel like I have
done something but I know that she is just crying because she has been through
alot!*

Today so born because in luch we had to seat where had put us but it was fun at the table I seat in.

One day at church my "boyfriend" Chris got arested for clowning on the cop it was so funny.

Each entry offered a poignant glimpse into the girls' daily realities with school, peers, boys, and family. Through observing them as writers, I also learned about the kinds of support sixth, seventh, and eighth grade at-risk girls needed in order to produce written text. Most notably, I came to view "best practices" for writing instruction with these students as possessing a unique place within the conceptual grounding of writing process pedagogy for adolescents (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Elbow, 1973; Kittle, 2008; Rief, 2007; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988). Moreover, constructing the project as a Third Space¹ writing group—located in the school but remaining separate from the routines, curriculum, and evaluative processes of the school—created a conduit between the realms of out-of-school and in-school writing practices the girls experienced. In this manner, the Third Space setting made visible certain important factors that place girls at risk for academic failure and ways writing pedagogy can serve to alter the trajectory of high school attrition looming before them.

At the conclusion of her book *Just Girls: Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*, Finders (1997) wrote of the importance of literacy instruction for adolescent girls:

Left to their own devices, students have few options but to live out received scripts, invisible and impossible to revise. Literacy instruction can begin to make visible to students the roles that are presently available in our texts, in our classrooms, in our society. When we begin to examine the motivations behind particular publications, we begin to change those publications. (pp. 130–131)

A decade later, literacy instruction concerned with fostering positive identities for adolescent girls is still critical (Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007). A recent American Association of University Women (AAUW) study, "Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education" (2008), revealed that adolescent girls in the United States most at risk for dropping out of high school and otherwise falling through the cracks of academic achievement are ethnic minority girls from low-income families. Noting similar concerns, Inness (2000) wrote in the preface to *Running for Their Lives: Girls, Cultural Identity, and Stories of Survival*:

¹ Third Space theory is discussed in Chapter One.

For many reasons all the world's girls are placed in the margins of existence. But how much infinitely more complex and perilous this situation is when girls are doubly or triply marginalized by socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and a host of other factors. (p. xi)

The demographic point where gender, minority status, and low family income converge places girls in a precarious position for obtaining a high school diploma, meeting the passing requirements of state mandated standardized tests, and being admitted into institutions of higher education.

In her study of a high school teacher working to empower ethnic minority adolescents through writing, Fisher (2007) noted,

All too often there is an assumption in the education community that promoting student self-awareness through writing and performance means that students are not acquiring the skills they need for "academic literacy." In the 21st century, the traditional English teacher has to be so much more; he or she also has to be a healer. This is especially true in urban public schools. (p. 14)

To build on Fisher's ideas of contemporary writing pedagogy and address the needs of ethnic minority girls from low-income families that the AAUW report illuminated, I conducted a three-and-a-half-year study with this population of learners considered most at risk for not achieving academic success in order to gain a sense of: (1) Who are at-risk girls? (2) What role does writing play in their lives? And, (3) What can schools do to prevent the loss of their intellectual potential? Through such questions, I hoped to find a way to help at-risk girls use writing to "aspire beyond 'ascribed lives'" (Fisher, 2007, p. 19).

In analyzing the writing produced in the group, I soon realized my inquiry not only pertained to print the girls composed but also textual elements extending beyond print that were similarly used to produce and sustain narratives about the girls' identities (e.g., spoken Discourse, music, multi-modal media, photos, symbols). I also discovered all writing created by the girls was driven by an underlying autobiographical impulse. In fact, to a large extent, my work highlighted the intricate and mirroring relationship between self and text for these adolescent girls who used writing as an emotional salve and social subterfuge in order to sort through their life experiences, self-actualize, practice gender roles, and document their slow but methodical disengagement from school. On a good day Amber wrote in a piece she entitled "Feeling Krunk":

But all people think
I'm a ghetto girl from the hood, but I know I'm
not just that I'm more than that. I'm a smart,
strong minded girl with goals and future. I

know this might be what some people say and
it never happens. Because they might get all
strung out but I know that isn't going to [be] me.

On a bad day, Amber wrote about struggling with memories of being molested when she was five, boys constantly calling her fat in school, and contemplating “ending it all.”

If writing skills are a key measure to academic success and writing is one of the few places at-risk adolescent girls have to give voice to their life experiences, then writing pedagogy for this population of learners is critical and much more care needs to be given to their literacy practices and pedagogical needs. Consequently, 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.