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Challenging the Limits of Literacy, Gender, and Student-Centred Pedagogy

A review of *Just Girls: The Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High* by Margaret J. Finders. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.

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“After spending 13 years at the front of a language arts classroom, I decided to move to the back where it seemed to me some interesting literacy work was going on: a note secretly passed, a magazine carefully concealed between the pages of a science workbook. Around the fringes of my seventh-grade classroom, I had glimpses into a literate culture that was not part of any official curriculum” (p. 1)

One of the greatest values of critical ethnography is its ability to offer a detailed depiction of the meaning and practices of everyday life read against the dominant discourses that name and organize official reality. Margaret Finders offers such a reading in her text *Just Girls: The Hidden Literacies and Life in Junior High*. In a year-long ethnographic study, Finders braved the hidden and not-so-hidden world of young adolescent girls as they negotiated their first year of junior high school. Her focus was on the unsanctioned literacy practices occurring in the margins of school and home for 12- and 13-year-old Euro-American girls. In documenting the girls' use of teen magazines, yearbook inscriptions, note-passing, and graffiti, as well as their participation in authorized school literacy activities, Finders reveals a picture of young adolescent life that may have readers remembering all too vividly the pain and pleasure of their own adolescence. More importantly, this glimpse into girls' literacies and lives vividly challenges common sense assumptions about student-centred pedagogy, literacy, and adolescent life.

Finders found the girls in her study divided into two antagonistic groups: one she named the “Social Queens” and a smaller group, the “Tough Cookies.” Social class distinguished the middle-class Social Queens from the working-class Tough Cookies or “Trailer-Park kids,” as they were called by their teachers. The Tough Cookies were serious, “good girls” who had extensive family responsibilities in addition to their school work. The Tough Cookies used literacy primarily as a private, solitary activity, in which they

carefully protected the realities of their home lives from teachers and peers. The Social Queens used both sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices to consolidate a unified performance among its group members, to enact the happy, popular, heterosexual teenager, and to establish school primarily as a social event.

In both cases, the social positioning of Tough Cookies and Social Queens within the class and within the community sabotaged any simplistic attempt at student-centred pedagogy and made a mockery of the notion of a classroom as a safe haven or as an inclusive community. The teachers seemed oblivious to the fact their seemingly rich language arts programs, with its appeals to student choice, personal engagement, and school community, was undermined by the complex social hierarchy of young adolescent girls and most shocking of all, by school's own literacy events. The Social Queens denied their intellectual engagement in school literary activities, measured their status by the size and number of their pictures in the school yearbook, shared easily, often in efforts to "kiss up" to the teacher; the Tough Cookies, knowing full well the social costs of a school literacy program that demanded "sharing," refused or undermined efforts at group work and peer editing, and largely refused the engagement or "interference" of teachers in their school writing practices. Marginalized in the school, pictures of the Tough Cookies were not often found in the yearbook, and yet the school yearbook was the central literary event in their junior high, with class time provided for its preparation and delivery. The Tough Cookies were isolated within the school, the Social Queens, high on the social ladder, were "at home" in the school, and their lives assumed as a given in the nature and organization of school literacy events. Finders comments quite rightly, "A pedagogy built on comfort, built on students' experiences, will, of course, continue to privilege those who feel most at home in the classroom" (p. 119).

But while the Social Queens were certainly more comfortable in school, their literacy education, perhaps their entire education, often appeared vacuous. By Finders account it left them unable to critically read their own teen magazines and certainly unable to see beyond their own life experience. Furthermore, the simplistic notions of student-centred pedagogy did not address the realities of the lives of Tough Cookies, providing at best a disengaged literacy that functioned primarily as camouflage, leaving them unable to understand or counter their own positioning in the school or community hierarchy.

Finders reveals that the choices and conditions of school literacy activities were not informed by the everyday social lives of adolescence even in what appeared to be a well-intentioned, progressive school committed to sound pedagogy. In my reading, the fault lies in part with the theory and practice of student-centred pedagogy articulated in the progressive language arts program offered in this school. While such a pedagogy may suggest greater student choice, peer collaboration and the possibility of a "shared" literacy, it failed to provide a curriculum informed by the complex social lives of young women that would promote community, and, more

crucially, critical literacy. It appeared that in the school Finders studied, as I suspect in many others, it was the practices of student-centred pedagogy that were at the core of the program, not the students and their educational and intellectual needs, their social circumstances in school and community. This pedagogical discourse must indeed be powerful if it draws teachers away from the everyday realities of their students' lives—students whom they know or at least are in contact with every school day.

The data rang true and hard even for Finders. In the best tradition of critical ethnography, she candidly admitted her own surprises and resistances to the data, particularly concerning notions of student-centred pedagogy and the nature of adolescence. For example, Finders having selected a school with a seemingly rich language arts curriculum committed to a student-centred approach, expected her research would support such an approach. However, the girls' literacy practices proved otherwise:

I thought that by selecting as a research site a language arts program where reading and writing were abundant and central, I would write of community and collaboration and inclusion. Yet, after a year of research, I am now less sure of the pedagogy that previously I had embraced so completely. (p. 1)

Finders also spoke her own difficulty in seeing beyond what she described as her discursive filters in relation to "normal" adolescent behaviour:

Yet my own discursive filters were so strong that it literally took months of documentation of counter-examples to refute the dominant image of the "normal" adolescent. . . . I held tightly to my bedrock assumption about the growing significance of best friends and attempted to fit all girls into particular social relationships by force of this assumption. (p. 30)

Data on both groups of young girls revealed a close relationship with parents, and certainly not the trauma and stress suggested by common discourses (or myths as Finders calls them) about adolescence. Even for the Social Queens the importance of their peers did not eclipse their relationship to their mothers. Furthermore, although teachers and parents fully expected trouble from their adolescents, which they attributed to "raging hormones," the trauma did not materialize. The common sense discourses about adolescent life did not capture the experiences of parents and teenagers in the study. Yet this was not always easy to see or accept.

Unfortunately Finders' study confirmed all too well the marginalization of young women in schools. In addition to the obvious alienation of working-class girls, the young women in both groups were constrained by notions of "the good girl": a position privileging niceness, docility, and cooperation (cf. Harper, 1996; Cherland, 1994; Fine, 1992; Walkerdine, 1990; Gilligan, 1990; Lesko, 1988). In one particularly frightening quote, Finders makes apparent how "good girls" may be named and used within classrooms. With several girls absent from class one day, a teacher in Finders' study complained:

I've lost all my spacers. I know it's terrible to say, but it's true. . . . Oh, you know: naughty boy, spacer, naughty boy, spacer, naughty boy. (p. 124)

The teacher was referring to her efforts to use girls to physically separate the “problem” boys from each other. The girls kept the naughty boys from sitting next to each other and disrupting the class. In another example girls were strategically placed to help the boys who were struggling with their school work. Finders commented, “the institutional design for a good girl positioned her to be used at best as a nurturer and at worst as nothing more than a physical barrier, a ‘spacer’” (p. 125). Finders’ study draws a vivid picture of those who are rendered as more or less successful “spacers,” whose own needs and interests are marginalized in favour of “difficult” boys or particular notions of teaching practices. Examining the detail in the lives of the six young women, Finders questions the messages sent to young women when becoming “nice, kind and helpful” or “popular” is privileged over their intellectual needs and interests.

It is possible that the teachers, in articulating a student-centred discourse, are themselves rendered “nice, kind and helpful” in their efforts to “make students feel comfortable” in the classroom. I continue to wonder about the needs and interests of nice teachers, and about uncomfortable tensions and important conflicts that are suppressed in efforts to remain true to the construct of the ideal (female) teacher produced in student-centred pedagogy. I wonder whether teachers, particularly women teachers become “spacers” in the school, separating, absorbing, and suppressing the “naughty,” contradictory details evident in everyday life that threaten, among other things, the conventional discourses that produce and normalize particular versions of student-centred pedagogy, literacy, female adolescence, and middle-class family life. How and when do teachers refuse the “comfortable” and question the practices and organization of school life? How do we understand the power of particular discourses to blind us to what Finders’ makes so obvious in the lives of these young women? Finders commented somewhat optimistically at the end of her text that “[l]iteracy education can begin to make visible to students the roles that are presently available in our texts, in our classrooms, in our society” (p. 130). But her findings are discouraging, and I was left wondering to what degree teachers are themselves able to use literacy to make visible and transform their own positions, let alone to work their students.

Finders raises but does not elaborate on these kinds of questions. In part she is hampered by theoretical and practical limitations in her study. As Finders freely admits, her study is not long enough. I was also surprised at how little data there was for a year-long study. Further, I had expected more attention to the racial and sexual orientation assumed in the discourses constructing the “perfect adolescent girl” and student-centred pedagogy. While Finders’ text is important in exposing how social class and gender were crucial factors in the literacy of students, more discussion on other forms of difference configuring the literacies and lives of young women might have been illuminating. Indeed, since sexuality was at least

hinted at in the unsanctioned literacy of the young women, and since race is implicated in the monoracial (Euro-American) nature of the school population, such a discussion would seem appropriate.

Finders used a traditional notion of literacy which may have truncated her analysis. For Finders a "literacy event" occurred whenever print source materials were employed. However, in a number of instances reading and writing print did not appear to be a key component in the activity described. Some activities were perhaps discursively produced but not essentially print based; for example, the selling of goods and services through home parties was described as a literacy event in the homes of the Tough Cookies. Although print material was involved in this event, it was primarily mediated through talk.

Finders demonstrated very persuasively that reading and writing were at times used to mark the girls' passage from childhood to adulthood. But the centrality of these practices in girls' lives may have been an effect or a by-product of a study that highlighted print literacy. Rather than restrict literacy to those activities in which reading and writing appeared central, Finders might have employed broader notions of "reading" and "text." There is too much hidden or missing in the media-rich lives of young adolescent girls at the end of the twentieth century to focus simply on print sources. Dress, music, dance, and photographs, which are mentioned but not pursued in the study, would have provided an important focus, connecting and enriching the more traditional literacies noted in the study. For example, constructions of sexuality and the body were implicated in some of the unsanctioned literacy practices of the girls. A focus on "text" might have allowed for a more powerful discussion of the sanctioned and unsanctioned body in the hidden and not-so-hidden lives of junior high girls. The concept of discourse also might have allowed Finders to address a broader notion of the material and linguistic practices that create the life scripts available for girls and young women.

In general, Finders needed a richer theoretical basis for her study. At the very least she needed to be more critical in her use of theory. Finders used theory primarily to set background or to name what she observed. Sprinkled through her text are various terms: "social roles" from Goffman (1959), "terministic screens" from Burke (1990), "private-public dichotomies" from Weiss (1993). But this piecemeal approach left Finders unable to offer a broader theoretical discussion of her findings or to offer much in the way of intervention into research, theory or, most importantly, pedagogy. It appeared to me that Finders needed a theory that would account for and explain the following: 1) the nature and power of unsanctioned literacies; 2) the nature and power of dominant discourses and so-called common sense wisdom; 3) the relationship between discursive and material practices; and, 4) the nature of gender and adolescence as performative acts; and 5) the school as a social and historical institution, producing and reproducing social difference.

A number of scholars who conduct research on gender (cf. Cherland, 1994, 1993; Jones, 1993; Walkerdine, 1990; Davies, 1989) draw on feminist

post-modern theory and some are turning to psychoanalytic theory (cf. Kaplan, 1998; Walkerdine, 1997; Harper, 1996) to sort through these and other questions, but any theoretical frame would be welcomed that would address how identity is performed with and against the scripts made available in school, family, and community; how and why particular scripts are adopted and resisted; and how and to what end do unsanctioned literacies support or disrupt dominant scripts; and considering these questions, how best to intervene in school practices to provide the best education for young women of various classes, races, ethnicities, etc. These are central questions in the field. In terms of practice, some teachers have begun to work with popular and often unsanctioned texts (pulp fiction, comic books, teen magazines, film and television), and to shift from a student-centred, reader-response model to a cultural-critique model (Cherland, 2000; O'Neill, 1993). Such work looks promising, and, in light of Finders' study, seems crucial.

Finders' book adds to the growing scholarship in the area of adolescent girls and their schooling. Her insightful and beautifully written text is a vivid reminder of the importance of such work, and the need for a pedagogy that transforms "just girls" into extraordinary young women with extraordinary teachers. But, in order to provide the best intervention into the school lives of girls, young women and their teachers, the shift needed now is from naming to understanding the nature and power of sanctioned and unsanctioned discourses that organize school life for young women and their teachers. In this, I look forward to Finders' future work.

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