A pattern in our students’ paired book talks puzzled my partner teacher and me. Although students could read any book they chose, and talk about that book to anyone else who had read it, the girls tended to talk always in the same pairs. We questioned two female focus students about this pattern during a formal interview. One girl explained that when she was done reading a book, she would hand it to her friend and say, “Read this, you’ll like it. Then we can have a book talk.”

Teacher: [What if] somebody who is not your friend comes up to you and says, “I’ve read Stuart Little, too, so let’s have a book talk.”

Both: (laughter)

One: I guess I would do it because it’s part of my grade...but still I would rather do it with my friends.

Two: Of course.

One: I wouldn’t feel as open talking about my opinion or anything. I mean, I would still talk about it, but just not as openly as I would with [my friends].

Two: Because we know if we get in an argument, it’s gonna be a civilized one...like a logical, opinionated little argument. [With others] it can get kind of out of hand—if you argue. I think I would feel more limited if I did it with another person.

My colleague and I had set up these book talks as a way to get students to work collaboratively to increase their comprehension of literature, but our program had been co-opted. These girls were using reading and book talks to reinforce ties of friendship and to mark and practice social and gender roles. They worked only with their friends, demarcated their social group, and avoided “unfeminine” arguments.

In Just Girls, Margaret Finders examines the literacy practices of a group of seventh-grade girls and finds that they, too, use literacy for their own purposes, and not necessarily the intended purposes of the school. She brings together sociocultural literacy theory and the myriad literacy experiences of five girls in a Midwestern middle school to help us focus on school literacy practices and our teaching pedagogy. For a year, she followed these girls through their days, in and out of school. What she discovered led her to challenge what she calls the “myths of student-centered pedagogy” (p. 118). A “writing workshop” classroom is not necessarily a comfortable, safe place for students to feel included; Atwell’s (1987) ideas of time, ownership and response cannot conquer well-established patterns of power—which come from popularity, personal ap-
pearance, and privilege that extend beyond the classroom. Instead, "the discourse of student-centered pedagogy creates filters that hide the contamination of the room by [these] other contexts and other social roles" (p. 118). Until we look at and recognize the complex social webs in which our students live, we cannot hope to have a truly student-centered pedagogy.

Finders claims that "free choice," an essential element of the writing workshop pedagogy, is "the greatest myth of all" (p. 120). She argues that an "awareness of political and social consequences limited choices for the [girls]" (p. 120). This is an important point, because this awareness is one that many teachers do not share with their students. There is no free choice to write on feminist topics if other students harass you for your choice. If the outside world privileges narrative writing, where is the free choice to write poetry?

We need, she maintains, to revise our thinking about adolescents and to see their complex worlds. Our own findings, then, will lead us to work toward a "student-negotiated pedagogy" (p. 126) in which we acknowledge and work within the dynamics that exist in the middle school classroom, making visible the political tensions that accompany literate choices. The pay off, particularly for girls, will be the ability to confront and change the scripts that society has written for them before they begin writing them for themselves.

A former middle school teacher and now a professor of English and Education at Purdue University, Finders studied the five seventh graders for a year. She identified two group leaders and their circles of friends, two groups she came to call by the names their mothers used for them: the "social queens" and the "tough cookies." She developed trusting relationships with the girls and their families and was granted access to the girls' uses of literacy, both in and out of school, both official and hidden. "I wanted to explore the secretive literate practices that lurked about...I thought that by selecting a language arts program where reading and writing were abundant and central, I would write of community and collaboration and inclusion...I thought I would have a different story to tell" (p. 1). Just Girls tells the story she found.

Finders found that girls were using the literacy practices of their reading and writing workshops to "mark special status and allegiance, and...to monitor and sustain social roles" (p. 54), just as my girls were doing with their book talks. She shows us how diverse our adolescent students' needs are by describ-
ing her findings as she focuses on the literacies of the two groups of girls, the middle class “social queens” and the working class “tough cookies.” These two groups used reading and writing in different ways and for different reasons; seeing their differences challenges us to look more closely at adolescents’ literacy practices, and to wonder whether current pedagogy truly addresses the needs of these students.

Until her study, Finders found her view of students “filtered” by what she calls the “discourse of adolescence” (p. 28). She contends that this discourse leads most teachers to believe in the “universal adolescent” (p. 121), who needs greater independence, more connection with peers and less with family and adults. The “social queens” and “tough cookies” betrayed the myth of this belief. While the “social queens” spent as much time as they could together, and without adults, the “tough cookies” were very family-oriented, and independent, getting together only at school recess and lunch. Tough cookie behaviors were reinforced by family beliefs and economics, but suggest a more complicated view of teenagers than many teachers acknowledge. It is in the failure to acknowledge these basic differences that we begin to complicate peer response groups in reading and writing.

Finders shows that issues of race, class and gender make adolescents a much more diverse group than we recognize. She illustrates this with the school’s annual yearbook signing event, the largest school-sanctioned literacy event of the year. While the teachers spoke of the yearbook all year as a way to create a feeling of belonging for everyone in the school and even gave up class time in the last week of school for mass student yearbook signing, fully twenty-five percent of the student body did not buy a yearbook. Neither of the “tough cookies” focus students bought a yearbook because it was too expensive. Of course, even without a yearbook, a student can sign the yearbooks of others. But Finders shows that signing (and even viewing signatures) was sometimes enacted by the “social queens” as a way to include some and exclude others from a social group, and the “tough cookies” did not sign yearbooks.

The social queens wrote bathroom graffiti as a documentation of their relationships and to try out new language and behaviors considered appropriate to the young women they were becoming, not the girls they had been.

The “tough cookies” exhibited different literacy practices. They were fiercely independent, even preferring to be interviewed separately. Finders notes, “It seems that the cookies were friends at least partly because they could not choose to join other groups” (p. 85), and the girls almost never saw each other outside school. Both lived in trailer parks, in homes that defied the stereotype of “tailor park girls,” for they were filled with books or magazines and home interior decorating catalogues. They saw literacy practices as either public and competitive, as in school, or private and personal, like the poetry they wrote alone. For them, literacy was a solitary task, not social. Their public personae were suggested by the library books they carried to school (not ‘zines), and they were not part of the school’s extracurricular activities and social events. They com-
plied with school demands as a way to gain access to a better financial future.

Finders' work caused her to question thirteen years of teaching language arts, just as her work led me to question my own writing and reading workshop practices and expectations. Nevertheless, she is not calling on us to abandon this pedagogy. It is important for us to address these asymmetrical power relations among our students consciously and explicitly. Writing can provide the means for our students "to investigate the cultural conflicts that serve to define and limit their lived experience" (Miller in Finders, p. 127). With the awareness gained from reading Finders' book, we can begin to work to create a truly student-centered pedagogy that acknowledges the social and political realities of our students' lives, helps them identify their needs and gives them tools with which to address those needs in creating alternative futures for themselves.