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Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Interest. Patrick J. Finn. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. 243 pp.

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When I began to read Patrick Finn's account of how to develop "literacy with an attitude," I felt a vague discomfort. What was it? Finn's writing is so personal, passionate, urgent, and he was speaking, not writing, it seemed, directly to me—sometimes in a way that I felt almost patronized—often giving away his very personal enthusiasms for ideas discovered that might enlighten him and me. There is no scholarly dispassion and distance, that careful, slow, and deliberate turning of the issues this way and that, the thorough inquiry into bodies of literature and research relevant to the setting out of a theoretical position. He is sharing his own quest. What made me most uncomfortable was that Patrick Finn was telling me a deeply personal story about his own painful realizations of the extent to which public education has betrayed him and all working-class people. And he was telling me how he has come to understand the way out. Not with patience, not with the care I expect from academic discourse. Finn demonstrates impatience for research or theory that does not offer immediate understanding of the problem of working-class literacy and immediate and workable solutions to that problem. In reading his book, I have had to let go of an academic pose and take on an activist stance.

Finn spends the first half of the book identifying the dynamics of the domesticating literacy taught to working-class children, as opposed to liberating and empowering literacy that he believes is sometimes taught to middle-class or elite children. Toward this end, he explores a wide variety of sources of historical, anthropological, and educational research and theory, none exhaustively, but each as it directly contributes to our understanding of these dynamics. This overview reads like a quirky and personal textbook on the politics and history of literacy, as well as the research on how literacy develops in different cultures. In his exploration, Finn highlights the work of Jean Anyon, Bowles and Gintis, John Ogbu, Paul Willis, Lois Weis, Basil Bernstein, Shirley Brice Heath, and Aronowitz and Giroux while including reference to many others along the way. For instance, he uses Aronowitz and Giroux's categories of intellectuals (hegemonic, critical, and transforming) as a way to introduce the work of Paulo Freire as it might guide a new approach to teaching literacy to working-class children. He then turns directly to the work of Freire and situates research and writing about progressive approaches to literacy within the politics of liberation that Freire preaches.

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Finn explores various teachers' work that either directly approaches a Freirean liberatory nature (e.g., Robert Peterson) or provides connections between that political process and what research shows works to develop critical literacy skills (e.g., Nancy Atwell and the New Literacy). He makes historical connections to literacy movements that happened during the Western European revolutionary period (the Corresponding Societies). Finn continues with segments of dialogue with his students in which they protest that they could not teach these ways because "it's political," and he refutes the implicit assertion that the regular curriculum is not. He ends with references to several organizations that have formulated a liberatory approach to the organization of the classroom and the teaching of powerful literacy. Finn then recaps the major themes of his book:

1) Traditional, directive methods are almost always found in working-class schools. [They] are inherently domesticating. . . . 2) Language and literacy are always parts of broader systems known as discourses. . . . Children from [communities that are different from and sometimes in conflict with school discourse] need to be taught school discourse . . . as part of a strategy in the struggle for justice. . . . They do not need to be forced to concede that school discourse is "right" and their discourse is "wrong." 3) There are different levels of literacy. [C]hildren whose discourse communities do not engage habitually in informational and powerful literacy must be taught these levels. [They] do not acquire them "naturally." 4) Conscientization and dialogue . . . can lead working-class students and parents to see that powerful literacy and school discourse are necessary . . . to further their own self-interest. 5) When self-defeating working-class resistance gives way to working-class demands for powerful literacy, the other subtle mechanisms that impede working-class children's education will not go away by themselves. [pp. 204–206]

He adds, "Working-class parents and older working class students must realize that they must master school discourse and powerful literacy in order to struggle for justice and equity. Teachers of working class children need to learn how to teach school discourse and powerful literacy to working class children" (p. 206).

I strongly recommend this book to anyone who is concerned about the failure of schools to educate all our citizens into a powerful democratic discourse. Yet I ended my reading of it as uncomfortable as I began. With all the evidence and resources Finn brings to bear on the problem, I am unconvinced we have the will to enact his advice and truly help working-class children develop literacy with an attitude.