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## Review

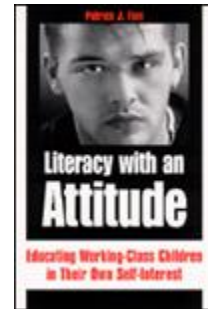
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### Literacy and working-class children

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

by David Dillon, Faculty of Education, McGill University

Patrick Finn has written a flawed but extremely important book. The flaw is that the book does not deliver what it advertises, namely, an examination of a radically different, transformative approach to literacy education based on a critical view of schooling. That alternative view emerges only toward the end of the book, and only one chapter looks at actual alternative practice in North American classrooms. So, while he eventually provides historical and theo-retical background to this alternative approach, he falls short in offering a detailed description of actual classroom applications and a thorough discussion of the embedded issues.



What Finn has effectively accomplished is to articulate in a readable and accessible way a broad explanation of how schooling, in the words of Ivan Illich, “schools children into their places in society” and thus actually achieves — with extremely powerful subtlety — its conserving role of reproducing the social status quo. In so doing, Finn makes a very important contribution to the ongoing debate about literacy education. He moves well beyond the usual methodological debate about traditional versus progressive methods of literacy education. Instead, he orients us to schooling — and literacy — from a critical (i.e., political) social and cultural perspective that changes the debate infundamental ways. In essence, he shifts the question from what method to use to teach literacy to what kind of literacy to teach. As Paulo Freire pointed out, the key issue in education is not achieving literacy, but rather what kind of literacy is achieved — domesticating or liberating. Finn articulates a message similar to that of other critical pedagogues such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Stanley Aronowitz, but in a readable and accessible style. In offering classroom, school, and community detail, he allows us to see how this subtle discrimination actually works.

Finn’s approach is creative and effective. Rather than surveying and summarizing a large number of studies in typical academic style, he chooses a small number of key studies that have influenced our understanding and weaves their findings into a broad and coherent theory. He describes their findings in great “slice-of-life” detail that takes us right into the complex, gritty reality of classrooms and schools in almost story-like fashion [See [BOX](#)].

However, the reader wants to know what kind of alternative approach might result in

marginalized students actually identifying with school and wanting what school could offer. It is precisely on this aspect that the book does too little. Readers who wish to pursue the answer to this question will have to consult other books such as Ira Shor's *Empowering Education* or edited books such as *Teaching for Social Justice* by Ayers, Hunt, and Quinn.

Nevertheless, Finn's book is still very important and deserves to be read by teachers — since all levels of schooling can be affected by these “subtle mechanisms” — by parents, and by concerned citizens. In fact, Finn himself expresses more hope for changes in schooling arising from the awareness and pressure of parents than from change originating within the schooling system.

Finally, despite the flaws, this book makes important contributions to the ongoing debate about literacy education.

- Most obviously, Finn exposes the “subtle mechanisms” at work in mainstream schooling that have such powerful discriminatory effects. This charge of bias has been leveled at schooling for some time, yet it is only in recent decades that research has begun to reveal in some detail how schools actually accomplish this effect through their “normal”, unquestioned practices. Finn makes this research accessible to a broad readership.
- In addition, he helps focus attention on the issue of social class. Unfortunately, it is an issue too often overshadowed —and obscured — by issues of race/ethnicity, gender, and ability, despite the established evidence that students' social class background is perhaps the strongest correlate of school success and levels of educational attainment in our schooling system.
- In a broader and more profound way, Finn helps shift the framework of the debate about literacy education, essentially providing a critical social perspective on schooling and literacy, based on notions of “culture,” “identity,” and particularly “power” (with associated notions of “acculturation,” “resistance,” and “liberation”).
- Above all, like Freire, he highlights the essentially political nature of schooling — and the impossibility of being neutral within the system. Everything we do as educators either helps support the traditionally unequal and reproductive nature of schooling or helps change it toward a more just and empowering experience for all. He shares a telling anecdote about the reactions of teachers with whom he works to some accounts of teachers practicing “literacy with an attitude” in their classrooms. They almost always exclaim, “You can't do that in school! It's too political!” As Finn rightly points out, not engaging in alternative pedagogical practice is also political — but in a conserving, discriminatory way.

### **Finn's theoretical synthesis of working-class education and literacy**

- Some minorities feel they have been wronged by main-stream Americans and that “acting white” is a betrayal of their people. They develop what sociologists refer to as “oppositional identity.” Oppositional identity appears among working class whites to some extent as well. Talking and acting like a school teacher and valuing things school teachers value doesn't win you a lot of friends in working-class communities.
- Working class children with varying degrees of oppositional identity resist school through means reminiscent of the factory shop floor — slowdowns, strikes, sabotage, and occasionally open confrontation. The result is the “pretend-school model.” Teachers ask little of students in return for enough cooperation to maintain the appearance of conducting school.
- The discourse (ways of communication and the beliefs, attitudes, habits, and behaviors that underlie them — especially attitudes related to authority, conformity, and power) of work-ing class communities is at odds with the discourse of the schools. This makes acquisition of school discourse and powerful literacy difficult for working-class children.
- Progressive methods, empowering education, and powerful literacy tend to go together. Traditional methods, domesticating education, and functional literacy tend to go together. Progressive methods are nearly impossible unless children want school knowledge and cooperate.

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

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