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## Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their Own Self-Interest By Patrick J. Finn

Rosalie M. Romano  
Western Washington University, Rosalie.Romano@wwu.edu

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their own Self-Interest*

By Patrick J. Finn; SUNY Press, New York; 2009 (Second Edition)

Reviewed by Rosalie M. Romano, Western Washington University

When *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their own Self-Interest* (1999/2009) was published, Patrick J Finn framed his argument for teaching powerful literacy to poor, working-class children as a matter of justice. Powerful literacy is the education our children deserve because it fosters critical thinking about complex ideas and prepares young people to consider multiple perspectives and their own interests as they make life decisions. Finn exposed disparities in the aims and means of educating students according to their social class. Poor, working-class students received functional literacy that taught compliance, while students from privileged backgrounds were taught powerful literacy that promoted independence and leadership. The aims and means of education were distinct, separate and unequal, dispensed according to one's social class.

In 1999, on the national scene, education was moving towards accountability in its classrooms, with standards for content disciplines being written by their respective national associations, e.g. National Council for the Social Studies, National Council for Teachers of Mathematics, National Council for Teachers of English, Association for Science for All Americans. Individual states were also in the process of completing their own state standards for each discipline, and were adopting state proficiency tests to evaluate student progress towards meeting those standards. Teachers were wrestling with an increasingly diverse population of students, often with a high need for supporting services. School districts around the country began to ask for accountability from their respective state governments and some districts sued the state for unfair methods of funding schools, favoring some districts over others, as in the *DeRolph v. State of Ohio*. This was a landmark case where the state Court ruled in favor of DeRolph against the state of Ohio ([www.schoolfunding.com](http://www.schoolfunding.com)).

In this second edition of *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their own Self-Interest* (2009), a major argument addresses the competing tensions around the purposes of education in a democratic society. Finn poses this tension as "...the clash between citizenship rights, particularly social rights, on the one hand, and free-market economy and social class on the other" (p. 258). Systems of inequality, e.g. free-market and social class systems, serve those who participate as beneficiaries of those systems. Finn argues, on the other hand, that "[m]odern citizenship is a system of equality" (p.258; emphasis mine). Institutions serve one or the other, but cannot serve both, and our schools are sites where competing purposes of education play out society's multiple ideological visions. For a social democracy to maintain a way of life that is beneficial to its people, the people themselves must become guardians of forging a society where all can pursue domestic tranquility and live a life free from oppression from any quarter by nurturing the institutions that ensure justice for all. Otherwise we have "[l]aws, rules, and regulations interpreted and enforced by a professional class of politicians [who] have proven inadequate in securing and protecting social rights of ordinary citizens" (p. 175).

In the ensuing decade between the first and second editions, we as a society are faced with monumental challenges to our environment, to our infrastructure, to our social systems, and to our public institutions. Based on the 2010 US Census, people living in poverty have increased from 31 million in 1999 to 46.2 million in 2010, that is, 15% of the population of the US now lives in poverty. Of those who live at or below the poverty line, they are disproportionately African-American, Latino and Native American families. This loss of wealth among the common people is the highest in over two decades (<http://www.theatlantic.com>).

Finn's new edition of *Literacy with an Attitude* is more relevant than ever before. Current wealth is concentrating in the top 1% of the population, and what was assumed to be a stable majority middle class is rapidly dwindling, earning power declining, and resources eroded. The children of the majority of Americans send their children to public schools where teachers must be prepared to teach in ways that foster critical thinking and understanding of one's rights and responsibilities as a citizen of this country. Finn persuasively argues that what is indispensable in our United States is education for critical thinking and action to make our social democracy a just one for all its citizens, regardless of race, gender or ethnicity.

School is a major institution where competing tensions on purposes of education exist. Teachers may find themselves uncritically teaching the curriculum or being directed to deliver a particular content program. I am a teacher-educator who works with teachers in their public-school classrooms and participates in teacher organizations. The many teachers I know and work with are open to curriculum that promotes student intellectual engagement, and do not shy away from new ideas

or directions as long as it benefits their students. This book is for those educators and others whose aim it is to teach thinking with intentionality, what Finn calls literacy with an attitude! This is the powerful literacy of citizens who are aware of their own power and self-interest, and can use language to negotiate for those interests that support a better life for themselves including a living wage, universal health care, unions, and decent schools where powerful literacy is taught. This book is a must-read for all those who are committed to the work in social justice in education.

*Literacy with an Attitude* is outstanding for its straightforward argument that we can and must demand that powerful literacy is taught to all children, particularly those of the poor, and working-class. Finn structures his book by framing what powerful literacy is and how it differs from the literacy that is commonly taught to poor, working-class and, to a large extent, middle-class students. Regarding how literacy is taught so it can be “safe” rather than powerful, Finn builds his argument on rigorous studies of classrooms across social class, providing compelling examples of domesticating education that is rote and fragmented, rather than conceptual and linked to the world in ways that help students understand relevancy to their lives. He then focuses on classrooms, and the teachers and students who are taught in distinctly different ways, depending on their social class. In these chapters, he provides a thorough analysis of the research of theorists Paul Willis, John Ogbu, Shirley Brice Heath, Oakes and Rogers, and Jean Anyon who studied cultural and social class influences that effect student achievement. For the review of this research alone, this book has earned its place in teacher professional development and in teacher preparation programs for educators to understand how systems of inequality, the free market and social class, ally to impact not only teachers’ but society’s paradigm of education, and further, citizens’ responsibility and actions in a democratic society.

“Powerful literacy,” Finn states, “leads to positions of power and authority. Functional literacy is the mere ability to meet the reading and writing demands” of daily life and while it makes a person “productive and dependable,” it assures that this person is not “troublesome” (ix). I was intrigued with the way Finn explores and analyzes the null and hidden curricula of schooling that maintain the status quo, that is, power and authority for some and “domestication” for the rest of us. Using social class as the prominent factor of school success reveals how class confounds other factors of gender, culture and ethnicity that teachers must adapt and respond to in their classrooms.

I applaud Finn’s acknowledgement of “subtle mechanisms” that make it down-right difficult in trying to teach powerful literacy to poor and working-class children. When new teachers begin working in classrooms, I hear how idealistic new teachers can rapidly put aside principles of pedagogy that foster critical thinking in their students when they meet resistance from those very students. Instead the emphasis turns to how to control students, rather than helping them become critical learners of their world, which includes but is not limited to content disciplines. Teacher education programs that demonstrate a commitment to social justice include an understanding of the necessity of illuminating the “subtle mechanisms” at play in classrooms that maintain the old paradigm of compliance and domestication.

Finn examines the research on social-class studies to analyze how the system, the Old Paradigm, reconstitutes itself, keeping power limited to a few, and maintaining social classes, by definition, as unequal. We are familiar with the Old Paradigm which is predicated on meritocracy, a myth that is based on extrinsic motivation. Meritocracy is a belief that all students want lots of money and status, but only those who put forth the effort and hard work attain this. The rest are, as the belief goes, not willing to put the effort into the discipline and work it takes to become successful. Ergo, students who get high grades, pass all tests with good scores, and work to be in Advanced Placement and other programs for students who are deemed highly capable then have access to higher education, to internships and associations that promote access to status and wealth and power. This success, the myth tells us, is regardless of the socio-economic status of their parents. Anyone can make it. That is what the myth of meritocracy would have us believe. And schools as well as society accept this myth uncritically because it is so embedded in our national identity, and manifests itself in the ways schools are structured and in teachers’ pedagogy (pp. 166-168). Meritocracy becomes self-evident without a critical eye.

In the last section of the book, Finn is at his most explicit and best as he clarifies literacy with an attitude. In 1999, when the first edition of *Literacy with an Attitude* was published, Finn made the case that access to powerful literacy was a matter of justice. That was at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when neoliberal forces were coalescing and gaining power, accruing incrementally since the Reagan years of deregulation and “to starve-the-beast”, the beast “being a government too interested in the general welfare” of citizens (p. 259). This “starve-the-beast” (government) ideology that now in 2011 puts at risk social welfare and programs that protect those who are among the poor, working-class, minorities and immigrants, and what used to be the middle class. All these groups and others are suffering from collapse of financial institutions, implosion of the housing market, decrepit infrastructures, flattened salaries, state government attacks on unions, and the dismantling of our public school system in favor of privatization in the form of vouchers and charter schools (p. 224). In this 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Literacy with an Attitude*, Patrick Finn reframes the argument of 1999 and in this

edition states: “Every citizen has the *right* to powerful literacy. It is a right equal to civil rights and political rights” (p.ix; emphasis mine)

Finn requires his readers to reconsider the purposes of school in a democratic society by linking the aims and purposes of education with empowering and critical literacy, literacy with an attitude. While he provides examples of teachers and programs in public schools that engage in empowering and critical literacy, the responsibility is on each of us to contribute to the promise of our public schools by becoming teachers who empower their students through powerful literacy, by being parents and concerned citizens who engage with one another and with educators about the aims and purposes of public schools in a democratic society. What is the society we envision for our children?

Is it a society where 46.2 million Americans live in poverty? Where one in six Americans live below the poverty line, and the median income dropped for the third year in a row? We are currently living in a country where the number of citizens without health insurance climbed to 49.9 million, equal to the populations of Texas, New York, Alabama, and Vermont combined. And we are evolving a new underclass, replacing what was the stable, middle class of this nation (US Poverty Levels Rise, 2011).

Powerful literacy would transform the classroom into a site of relevance and inquiry about how we live and why we live this way. Such literacy would constitute a curriculum where history includes our nation’s struggle for social rights through unions. Why did people need unions in the first place? What counted as work? As a work day? As a living wage? Why must there be poverty? Our students need to know labor history as part and parcel of all history so they can understand that others fought for rights we take for granted today: the eight-hour work day, provisions for child labor, livable wage, health insurance, and more (p.252). Powerful literacy would challenge each line of Berthold Brecht’s famous words and not only question “Why?” but speak out for justice, rather than compliance.

Those who take most from the table, teach contentment.  
Those for whom the taxes are destined, demand sacrifice.  
Those who eat their fill, speak to the hungry of wonderful times to come.  
Those who lead the country into the abyss, call ruling too difficult for ordinary folk.  
(www.thinkexist.com)

What is indispensable is education for critical thinking and action to make our social democracy a just one for all its citizens. Our students, who are our collective future, will need to be prepared to speak truth to power, to name the world, to clearly assess the precarious state of our environment, and respond in life-sustaining ways. To do this, students will need teachers who themselves are critical and empowered, who can name the world and who envision ways of living that are sustainable and equitable. The Old Paradigm that Finn describes has brought us to dire straits economically, environmentally, and socially. The New Paradigm Finn argues for has the potential for rejuvenating our democratic ideals of freedom, justice, and domestic tranquility for all citizens, a reclaiming of The Common Good and The Public that are required for a robust democratic society.

And isn’t this the education our citizens deserve?

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