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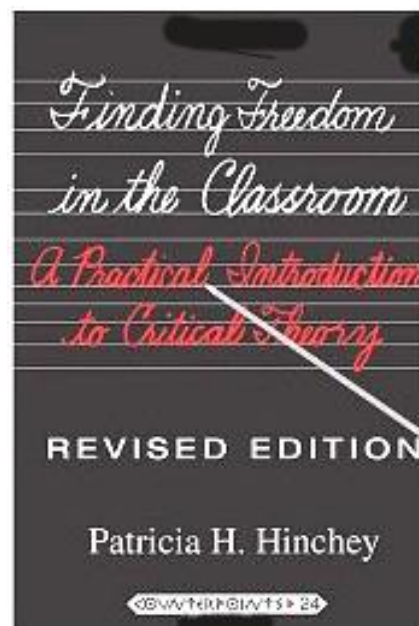
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Stephanie Tuters

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

University of Toronto

Patricia H. Hinchey is a faculty member at Penn State and a research fellow at the Education and the Public Interest Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder. A former high school English teacher, Hinchey has taught at the pre-service, graduate and undergraduate levels. Her areas of expertise and teaching include English, theory and policy, secondary language arts, media literacy, observation and fieldwork, and writing. She has provided in service and professional development for in-service teachers and college faculty. Her wealth of experience and knowledge of teaching and learning at both the secondary and post secondary level make her uniquely qualified to write practical introductions to theory for teachers. Hinchey has



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published numerous scholarly and practical works. *Finding Freedom in the Classroom* was first released in 1998. The revised edition is volume twenty-four in the Counterpoints series “Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education” edited by Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg.

Finding Freedom in the Classroom acts as a reminder to continue to approach education (and life) with a critical eye. In a time when some members of society have so much the necessity of questioning why others have so little can be forgotten. The reasons for working to create more equitable schooling and society can be overlooked. The preface to this revised edition begins with statistics which are used to demonstrate that inequity and its associated problems are still quite prominent in the United States. These statistics help illustrate why Hinchey feels it is still very important to remain committed to transforming schools. Hinchey describes in the preface how “child hunger in the US rose by 50 percent in 2007 (p. vii)” and “nearly-fourth of African-American households and just one-fifth of all Hispanic households experienced what is euphemistically called “food insecurity (p. vii).” Hinchey urges teachers to use the text to help them “find their public voice and use it on behalf of children (ix).” The necessity and difficulty of achieving positive change is illustrated throughout the book by historical and recent real life examples.

Finding Freedom in the Classroom is written for teachers, in accessible language. It is intended to be a starting point for teachers who wish to gain practical preliminary information about critical theory. As practical as it is, the book is not a guide to teaching and thinking critically. It is an introduction to central tenants of critical theory. Teachers are introduced to what it means to be a critical theorist, how to think critically and how and why to encourage the development of critical thinking in their students. At the end of each chapter Hinchey lists relevant readings to help teachers learn more about critical theory and its foundational theorists. Readings include theoretical texts and recent media documents that illustrate the need for critical educators and thinkers, and encourage teachers to look at situations in their schools and neighbourhoods from different angles. Hinchey provides

examples of both how and why to question what they think they know.

Hinchey highlights the importance and necessity of thinking outside of the box and recognizing that common knowledge and practice is not the always in the best interests of students. For Hinchey, society is in a dismal state; it is ripe with inequalities. She believes society is controlled by the wealthy and privileged and through the compliance of everyday citizens and teachers to the status quo. She states her belief that schooling serves other purposes than academic ones, and that “public schools are designed to serve the interests of the state (p. 11).” Schooling is designed to help students become active participants in the current political and economic climate. “Common schools are created to help create a compliant and patriotic populace (p. 11).” School curriculum and practices are based on fundamental positivistic beliefs about what it means to be a good American, what Americans should strive for, and what should be rejected. According to Hinchey, these beliefs are presented as though they are facts, and teachers and the rest of society accept them as though they are, perpetuating inequalities and injustice. “Ultimately, everything we do sends a signal about what we believe and value, whether we’re aware of it or not (p. 8).” Therefore, even when teachers feel they are being apolitical in their teaching they are taking a stand on an issue or making a political statement based on which practices they use and which educational policies they comply with.

Hinchey describes how teachers administer things such as standardized tests without questioning what the tests are measuring and why. She believes teachers have been conditioned to act without questioning and assume what they are doing is beneficial for their students and society. “School culture, like all others, is permeated with deeply held beliefs and assumptions often mistaken for fact (p. 3).” Hinchey believes those beliefs and actions contribute to the continuation of the status quo, which only certain people benefit from. She urges teachers to question everything, what they are teaching, why they are teaching it, what they are testing, how they are testing it and why. Once teachers

start questioning what they are doing and why Hinchey believes they will truly be acting in the best interests of their students.

Hinchey introduces teachers to epistemology. “Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that seeks to define “knowledge,” that seeks to explain what it means “to know” something, that seeks to understand how humans come to “know” things (p. 35).” She then introduces readers to what she believes are the two main competing epistemologies, positivism and constructivism. She explains that positivism, which views knowledge as a thing which is verifiable and born of scientific investigation, is the most popular epistemological standpoint, and the basis for much of society and what we know and teach, it also “permeates common language about teaching and learning” (p. 39).

Constructivism, which perceives knowledge as a matter of human interpretation and only exists when humans examine things and assign meaning to them, is identified as the desirable alternative and the basis of critical thinking. “The task of the constructivist teachers is to design experiences that will give students an opportunity to develop their own understanding of the data at hand (p. 43).” Hinchey does not assert that verifiable facts do not exist, but that we must be aware that science is not objective, and we can not be certain of as much as positivists claim we can. She encourages teachers to look closely at statistics and numbers used to justify teaching and testing techniques and to question their validity. She also highlights that science is not as objective as it is portrayed to be. Hinchey discusses how educational policies and programs can have political agendas that are not in the best interests of students and that are not as meritocratic as people perceive and present them to be. Hinchey supports her claims with real life examples of how education and other government programs and practices have failed certain students over time, and have contributed to their oppressed social and economic status.

Teachers are cautioned that rethinking our experiences and questioning our position in society and whether or not our actions have a positive or negative impact on our students

and society can result in some emotional discomfort. “Rethinking our own experiences may be distinctly uncomfortable (p. 76).” Hinchey believes that the pain that can accompany looking at our lives and actions in a critical way is worth it because of the positive change that is possible as a result. “It’s worth the effort, however, because such honest analysis can yield an intensely personal understanding of how privilege is sometimes purchased, rather than earned (p. 76).” Learning to be critical, and constantly question, is something that will take time to learn and process. This is illustrated by the fact that although the ideas Hinchey presents in the book seem radical they have been around for a very long time. They have their roots in the works of educational theorists such as Dewey and Rosenblatt. Hinchey provides a brief introduction to some of the fundamental critical theorists such as Dewey, Rosenblatt, Freire and McLaren, and provides references so teachers can explore these theorists further.

Finding Freedom in the Classroom is a very practical and accessible introduction to critical theory and its necessity. Hinchey implores teachers to recognize the importance of learning about critical theory to inform and improve their practice, and to see that a better understanding of theory will help enhance teaching and vice versa. Teachers who read this book will not find step by step instructions of how to engage in critical thinking and teaching. However, they will be provided with foundational knowledge about critical theory, real life examples of the necessity of engaging in critical thinking and examples of how Hinchey helped her students to engage in critical thinking and what happened in the process. Teachers are given an idea of what they can expect from their students and colleagues when engaging in critical thinking and teaching. Hinchey provides information about how to start sorting through what they learn and experience in their teaching and their lives as they begin to engage in critical thinking and practice. She implores teachers to begin to critically question everything in their lives and everything around them to improve their students’ lives and their own, to truly begin to teach in the best interests of their students.

About the Reviewer

Stephanie Tuters is a PhD student at OISE/UT in Theory and Policy studies and Educational Administration. Her research interests include social justice, equity, diversity, educational theory and policy and rural education.

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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
