

WHAT THEY DON'T LEARN IN SCHOOL: LITERACY IN THE LIVES OF URBAN YOUTH

JABARI MAHIRI, ED.
PETER LANG PUBLISHING, 2004
\$29.95, 284 pages

Reviewed by Casey J. Yandek

In *What They Don't Learn in School: Literacy in the Lives of Urban Youth*, Mahiri presents articles explaining 10 studies dealing with urban youth in relation to what is referred to as new literacy studies. According to Mahiri, new literacy studies attempt "to research and identify the specific nature and functions of an array of literary practices that young people appropriate for learning and expression" (p. 1). For the contributors to this collection, new literacy encompasses street scripts, hip-hop culture, gangs and gang literacies, and the lowrider car culture of Latino American youth. The studies also examine the youth of European, Asian, and Middle Eastern descent.

The studies presented in this collection employ qualitative research methods to examine their various subjects. According to the editor, the contributors to the collection offer a "postpositive stance in the use of qualitative methods to tell the stories of their informants" (p. 8). Furthermore, by Mahiri's own admission, what the presentation of the individual studies lacks in overall comprehensiveness, is made up for in "the breadth and variety of youth practices of literacy" (p. 8), with the ultimate goal of revealing "practices and perspectives of learning and literacy in young people's everyday lives" (p. 5). To that end, this reviewer finds the collection to be a success, expounding upon cultural norms that heretofore would be thought of as out of place in a classroom.

In the initial chapter of the work, Mahiri opens with an explanation of purpose and formation. Following this introduction are 10 chapters, each presenting a different study focusing on literacy events representing a wide variety of cultures and groups. Along with those previously listed, other studies examine the homeschooled and unschooled, cyberliteracy, adolescent girls and the romance novel, and performance poetry. Within each chapter,

immediately following the description of the particular study is a response to the research from an outside observer. This format allows for the researchers' works to be put into perspective by someone unrelated to the actual study, thus providing the reader with additional relevant information.

Of the studies presented in this volume, the two most significant were those conducted by Mahiri, who studied the writings of African American youth, and Cowan, who studied the artwork and drawings of Latino American youth in the lowrider car culture. At the heart of Mahiri's study is what he refers to as street scripts, or "provocative writings of African American youth created for their own purpose" (p. 19). The importance of this study for Mahiri is that, as teachers, "we need to know more about the generation we are losing" (p. 19). In an attempt to do this, Mahiri looks at the voluntary writings of students "who use literacy for self-expression rather than for grades or scholastic rewards" (p. 44). The results of this study suggest that African American students who might easily be written off because of factors such as socioeconomic background should not be forgotten so quickly. Rather, students such as those described in chapter 2 have a sense of hope that cannot be extinguished and are merely looking "for allies to assist them in finding ways to beat the odds" (p. 45).

Cowan, in his chapter entitled "Devils or Angels," looks at the artwork of youth involved in the lowrider culture. After explaining the lowrider culture and the cholos, or gangsters, who compose it, Cowan presents actual artwork from the study. Of particular interest was the work of a student named Karina, who interpreted an interpretation of the more traditional *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, an important piece of art in the Mexican American community. In Karina's interpretation, a Latina chola is depicted in a pose similar to that of the female in the original painting. According to Saldivar, who responds to the original study, Cowan is suggesting that students such as Karina are "involved in constructing alternative literacy and knowledges" (p. 75) which create a stark contrast to those of their middle class counterparts. It is important for teachers to recognize this, for Cowan concludes that the artwork of these students represents how they "must be feeling about how they are portrayed in mainstream texts in comparison with how they feel about themselves" (p. 76). These works, then, provide an excellent vehicle for teachers to understand their students and their students' ways of life.

In the concluding chapters of this work, researchers Sutton, Morrell, and Duncan-Andrade present studies on two relatively new phenomena: performance poetry and hip-hop music. In chapter 10, Sutton describes the literacy event in the African American community known as performance poetry and contends that it "as a literacy event, builds solidarity within the black community while increasing the literacy skills of both the poet and the audi-

ence” (p. 213). Sutton then presents this literacy event as having far-reaching implications in the classroom, suggesting that this should be used by teachers to improve and enrich the learning experiences of their students.

In a similar study, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade present hip-hop music as an effective classroom tool. As most teachers have probably observed, students can often interpret and analyze “complex and often richly metaphoric hip-hop music” that they have heard, but are unable to do so “in regards to canonical texts” (p. 247). The researchers in this case suggest that hip-hop music should be used in the classroom as a method for students to learn how to analyze and interpret literary texts. In responding to this study, Oakes makes the case that employing the hip-hop music of the students will not only make course material more interesting and teach proper analytical skills that can be transferred to other texts, but it will also establish a connection between student and teacher that will further expedite the learning process. More importantly, however, Oakes suggests that implementing this type of music helps teachers get at the more important issue central to the entire work, “re-defining whose culture and way of life counts as worth knowing and worth living” (p. 272).

Mahiri and the other researchers are calling on teachers of these too-often marginalized students to be aware of how the students communicate and make meaning both in the classroom and on the street. As Mahiri asserts, “educators often disdain the use of popular cultural materials in schools” (p. 3). Mahiri and others point to music, vernacular or voluntary writing, graffiti, and even rap music as viable methods of expression for urban youth. If teachers of these students refuse or are unable to acknowledge and employ these cultural vehicles of literacy, they will be unable to construct any solid foundation upon which to build lasting educational experiences.

Ultimately, Mahiri succeeds in presenting a provocative look at the marginalized students and the cultures they represent. *What They Don't Learn in School* offers teachers from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds insightful and useful information that when applied to classroom material and instruction, can enhance the learning experiences of all students.

Casey J. Yandek is associate principal at Archbishop Hoban High School in Akron, OH.