Introduction:

*What They Don’t Learn In School: Literacy in the Lives of Urban Youth* by Jabari Mahiri fulfilled my hopes for an intriguing as well as useful read. Because I went to a rural school my entire life, I had a substantial lack of knowledge with respect to urban environments and urban culture. Since I want to be prepared to teach in any setting, this awareness of the urban experience that Mahiri provided me with is essential for my professional development as a pre-service teacher. Lastly, I personally enjoyed the text due to the accessibility, authenticity, and fascination afforded by the authors’ styles of writing and varied, multidimensional topics.

Overall, Mahiri crafted his piece well, in that three central, fundamental themes kept emerging. These ultimately informed my reading in keeping my thoughts connected and organized. The first overarching idea that formed as I explored the text is the power of alternative discourses in making material relevant. The next recurring concept is the flexibility of the definition of literacy. Yet another motif is the value associated with maintaining respect for the opinions and insights of those who have not been socialized into mainstream discourses. I found myself understanding how these three themes would be relevant to me as a pre-service teacher as I examined the multitude of examples that were laid out in the various sections.

Of most import and intrigue for me are two sections in the text that critique the wider society and counter its hegemonic properties: “Border Discourses and Identities in Transnational Youth Culture” and “‘I used to go to school. Now I learn.’ Unschoolers Critiquing the Discourse of School.”

Chapter 4
Border Discourses and Identities in Transnational Youth Culture
By: Wan Shun Eva Lam

Content:

In this section of the text, Wan Shun Eva Lam challenges our traditional notions of movement and migration. Movement is no longer merely a transient, intermediary stage that exists between leaving from one place and arriving at another. Instead, she proposes motion as a constant, natural form of existence (79).

The author expands her expression of this concept by informing us that many immigrant students are “mobilizing various social, cultural, and linguistic resources to forge new grounds for defining themselves and relating to the sociopolitical structures around them” (80). In essence, because immigrant students are in a position where they must continually create compromises between their native discourses and the dominant discourses of their host countries, identity is no longer delimited geographically and culturally. Instead, these students maintain transnational connections that allow them to establish a new and complex way of living in which they “use their multiple subject positions—situated in various cultural and sociopolitical arenas—to subvert the social categories imposed on them by any one system” (83).

Wan Shun Eva Lam then supports her claims with a case study concerning Willis, a student originally from Hong Kong, now living in California (86). Willis is the epitome of identity transcending cultural and geographic constraints. The author conveys how Willis clings to Chinese sociocultural ties in the face of U.S. society, so as to avoid assimilation. However, it
is also clear that he calls upon his resident status in the U.S. to pass judgment on Chinese social and political realities that he opposes (89).

Additionally, Willis finds a third space, where he is simultaneously connected with China and the U.S. but also disconnected to an extent (89). Realized through his attraction to Japanese popular culture, the reality of this third space is the discourse of comics, which shares two features with the discourse of transnational identity: cultural production by the common people and hybridity (90-92).

**Insights:**

After reading this piece, I have come to some moving conclusions. First, it seems to me that these unique immigrant students have begun to look at their world through global eyes and that if, as educators, we want to reach out to them and make classroom material relevant for all students, we will need to find a way to do the same. For the justification of such a claim, you need look no further than the advent of technological innovations, primarily in the areas of communication and transportation, which has rendered our world increasingly smaller and created a globally interdependent reality. Consequently, diversity is the new fabric of our local and world communities. With the understanding that equality and fairness are central to the creation and perpetuation of peace and harmony in such an environment, we also have a responsibility to employ tactics, which foster equality of opportunity and which reverse discriminatory tendencies.

This commitment to the aims of social justice and relevancy is advanced significantly when we inject education with dynamism and help shape a new standard of being culturally multi-literate. Rather than focus our schools on socializing students “into the dominant discourses of U.S. society,” or excluding them from it as Wan Shun Eva Lam reports is the current standard, we can hope and strive for an elimination of this type of affording/restricting of power (79). Essentially, this means avoiding the assimilationist process that the author attests to and instead instating a pluralistic policy in which the values and social practices of the mainstream U.S. are not the be-all and end-all. In accordance, we leave the present cultural literacy propaganda behind and embrace the coexistence of the values and social practices of multiple cultures. To summarize, we look to those values and social practices of others in order to inform our own. In addition, this means we eradicate the “stigmatization of un-Amerianness” (80).

What this ultimately means for our perception and teaching of literacy is related to the way that the author connects discourse and culture. Wan Shun Eva Lam uses discourse, for example, to mean “the ways in which spoken and written language is used by specific groups of people to construct realities for themselves, based on their shared values, beliefs, and historical experiences (i.e., their shared culture)” (81). She also references the fact that conflict frequently originates from the oppositions between the ways that cultural groups perceive of discourse practices (82). My question is then, “Is there a method to convert these oppositions into respected divergences and to use them to bring people together rather than to drive them apart?”

I believe that, in part, immigrants themselves are already starting to do this in the ways that they choose to cope with their overlapping statuses by building unique systems that embed cultural practices from more than one group of people. This flexible notion of culture carries with it a flexible notion of literacy. We, as educators, should understand that being able to use language in different ways for different interests or circumstances is commendable. In our role as
teachers, we must secure such a foundation by first considering the importance and value associated with permitting and embracing alternative forms of literacy in our classrooms, such as the reading of comic books. If we cannot locate current forms of literacy in our schools that provide insight regarding cross-cultural exchange and fusion, we must look for them elsewhere and make a conscious decision to bring them into scholastic enterprises.

Lessons learned:

The most important lesson I take from this chapter is from Wan Shun Eva Lam’s own words, relating to a new version of multiculturalism that places the individual at the center. She states, “immigrant students are perceived not through the lens of a ‘national culture’ and found lacking, but are valued for their unique cross-cultural perspectives, and their potential for bringing cultures together for mutual critique and enrichment” (95). This reminds me that in order to truly see my students for who they really are, I must first unpack my own assumptions that arise from being a white, middle-class female living in the twenty-first century United States.

Strategies for my own teaching:

- Help students discover and discuss their simultaneous membership in various social categories and cultural groups and how those are borne out in discourse (82).
- Introduce a flexible sense of nation, culture, identity, and literacy (83-84).
- Encourage students to resist subordination to dominant discourses, guiding them to define their own identities (85).
- Choose materials that are evident of cross-cultural exchange and fusion, so as to foster sociocultural critique (89, 91).
- Develop students’ intercultural voices and perspectives (95).

Chapter 5
“I used to go to school. Now I learn.” Unschooled Critiquing the Discourse of School
By: Beth Lewis Samuelson

Content:

Samuelson introduces the chapter with a surprising statistic about homeschooling and its increasingly widespread nature: “Although rare even thirty years ago, today homeschooling is the choice of approximately 1.5 million children and their families” (103). She mentions that the experiences of homeschoolers can provide us with new and valuable insight regarding what we deem necessary for education (104). A particular form of homeschooling that Samuelson narrows in on is unschooling, which is unique due to its avoidance of traditional school curricula and schedules. These children are the ones to exercise choice on the matters of what to explore and with whom (105). Essentially, these students would be referred to as autodidacts. According to research that the author references, homeschoolers dedicate 2.25 to 3.75 hours each day to literacy (107).

Homeschoolers, and particularly unschoolers, as a discourse community have evolved an acute awareness of and appreciation for autonomy and independence (108). Reflecting these
qualities, socialization and unity within the community are the results of digital communication technologies like e-mail and instant messaging (109). Their online journals are yet another window on their world, a world characterized by purposeful and self-assured thoughts and actions, according to Samuelson (110). However, they do not possess “the secondary discourse of formal schooling that is shared, to some degree, by most Americans” (109). In closing, the author points out that her two informants, who are young, female unschoolers, wield a powerful literacy that they employ to criticize the discourse of school (115).

**Insights:**

In my opinion, various advantages and disadvantages emerge after examining the phenomena of homeschooling and unschooling. First, such a technique allows for incidental learning, which results in some of the learning being explicit and conscious and some being implicit (106). This could be problematic if the reliance on implicit learning produces a lack of focus or if it triggers a lowering of standards. In addition, operating under the attitude that teachers and students are learning together all of the time sets the stage for an absence of clear benchmarks and standards for particular developmental levels. Ultimately, this means a lack of control on the part of those teaching and no particular restrictions that would introduce a set of uniform goals or aims with regards to education.

On the other hand, one benefit is that students often have more control and ownership over their learning (107). This helps increase intrinsic motivation, retention, and excitement over learning. Since real life and schooling are not separate and distinct entities, education very quickly becomes relevant and connected (111). Because there are no set benchmarks or aims to accomplish and teachers and students are not held to prescribed content coverage, there is more time for conceptual development, project-oriented learning and performance-based assessment. There is also the possibility of greatly reduced social interaction with peers, since homeschoolers and unschoolers are not in a traditional academic setting where attendance is compulsory. However, there is also a higher chance that learners can engage in social interaction with actual professionals and experts in the field due to the freer nature of the academic setting. The other advantage is that there is less peer pressure and sociocultural stereotypes that learners need to cope with during their formative, adolescent years (114).

The trick is to strike as fine a balance as possible between maintaining learner input and freedom with high standards and focus. The other aspect to take into account is whether there is a point at which the institution of education is needed to protect children from their parents and guardians. When does the socialization of public education become necessary to prevent the socialization of parents/guardians? Who makes that decision and on what grounds?

**Lessons Learned:**

The most important lesson I can take from this section of the text comes from Samuelson’s statement about not discounting homeschoolers and unschoolers due to a lack of public school socialization. The author explicitly states, “Just as powerful critiques of American culture coming from other sectors have the potential to bring about changes for the better in mainstream culture, the discourse of these unschoolers has the potential to help bring about changes for the better in the way people in the United States talk about and do education” (110). What it essentially reminds me is that the institution of education is not perfect and students
deserve our continual attention to its improvement. Their input is one of the most valuable aspects of this process. Additionally, we need to be careful not to put education on an untouchable pedestal, which is what could very well happen if we did not listen to the voices of dissent from unschoolers and their plans for change.

**Strategies for my own teaching:**

- Give students practical advice for taking control of their own education (108).
- Help students see the value in maintaining their hopes and dreams and trusting their own voices rather than blindly complying (108).
- Encourage students to read and write on their own time for their own purposes and their own pleasure (107).
- Blur the boundaries between learning and teaching (115-116).
- Make activities and content relevant and connected (111).