



Swimming Upstream: Black Males in Adult Education (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 144)

Rosser-Mims, Dionne; Schwartz, Joni; Drayton, Brendaly; and Guy, Talmadge C., eds.
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Book Review

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What person of sound mind would make a conscious decision to swim upstream against the current of turbulent waters? The correct answer is “probably no one.” Swimming upstream requires not only excellent navigational skill but perhaps, more importantly, demands that one possess the tenacity and spirit of a survivor. That is precisely why the metaphor “swimming upstream” is so appropriate in describing the plight of scores of African-American men who elect to enter and succeed in higher education (1).

Swimming Upstream: Black Males in Adult Education is one volume in the series entitled: *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. This anthology is intended “to make space for the experience and voices of Black men in the canon of adult education literature, to promote a critical assessment of institutional policies and practices, and to foster awareness and involvement among adult educators” (89).

The format of this book is well-suited for academic settings. Each essay is preceded by a short introductory paragraph. At the close of each chapter the authors provide a robust list of reference sources that should prove helpful for students and educators alike.

The first chapter discusses the impact of race and racism in the American adult educational system. Chapter two addresses myths and stereotypes employed to depict Black men and their influence on educational attainment. Chapter three explores the reasons for entering adult basic education programs and the role of gender identity. The topic of high school equivalency is discussed in chapter four. Chapter five addresses young Men of Color and engagement in adult learning. Chapter six is concerned with college reentry for African-American males. Chapter seven addresses the sobering topic of Black male college study following a term of

incarceration. Chapter eight discusses military veterans and access to the GI Bill to pay educational expenses. The final essay, chapter nine, culminates with a call to action for educational practitioners.

Understanding context is critical. In recent years a growing constituency has emerged that believes society has entered a post-racial or “colorblind” era. They advance the proposition that one’s race or ethnicity has no bearing on one’s ability to survive and prosper in modern America. I strongly disagree with the post-racial theorists but recognize that it would be helpful for books like *Swimming Upstream* to squarely confront the legitimate concerns of post-racial proponents. In so doing one hopes that individuals on both sides of the argument will ultimately reach a consensus that the mission of ensuring equal educational opportunities for every individual remains a struggle that must still be waged today. *Swimming Upstream* moves that discussion forward with compelling statistical and anecdotal evidence.

In 1903, the late W.E. B. DuBois prophesied in *The Souls of Black Folks* that the problem of the twentieth century would be the “color line” – the invisible yet palpable line of demarcation between Caucasians and African-Americans that was often characterized by overt discrimination and bigotry. More than one century later the question of whether “Black lives matter” is, in my view, a logical extension of DuBois’ central thesis. It can be argued that *Swimming Upstream* may unintentionally serve to remind us that certain remnants of the issues raised by DuBois remain unresolved today. For some readers this will speak to the relevance and timeliness of *Swimming Upstream*.

An average book informs and a good book intrigues the reader. But an excellent book sparks self-reflection and may even compel one to act in new and bold ways. As a college instructor I routinely survey students to ascertain why they decided to embark on a college education. The primary responses from students generally, and African-American males specifically, are: “I want to make my parents proud of me” and “I want to set a positive example for my children/siblings/family.” Those learners confirm what I have long known to be true: that given equality of economic and institutional opportunities, African-American males have no less potential to achieve academic and vocational success than any other segment of the American population. *College study may not be right for everyone but it must become accessible for anyone*. Arguably that is the controversial and exciting rationale for *Swimming Upstream*. It is an excellent anthology that serves to affirm our collective belief in the basic humanity and intellectual capacity of every individual.

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