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Recommended Citation

Rowland, Michael L. (2001). "African Americans and the Self-help Revolution: A missing link in adult education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2001/papers/59>

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African Americans and the Self-help Revolution: A missing link in adult education

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Abstract: This roundtable discussion will recognize the significant role of self-help education and self-help literature in the lives of African American adults and to determine ways for adult educators to expand our knowledge base of self-help education for African Americans.

Recently, African American writers in the popular press and academicians (Copage, Vanzant, and bell hooks) have focused their attention on issues of self-help and personal growth for African American adults, as evidenced by the growth in the number of books written in the genre of self-help and African American consumer's book-buying habits (Smikle, 2000). A multicultural approach to adult education and self-help must include a review of literature that examines self-help education and its impact on African Americans' learning and development. An approach to adult learning that integrates the various dimensions of the lives of African American learners must be researched for the future growth of the field of adult education.

African Americans and Adult Learning

Many of the basic models of learning, development and program planning have often been developed with little concern for the unique needs of African Americans (Coolin III, 1994). The current theories of adult learning have also been criticized for their lack of cultural understanding and the role that race, economics, and gender play in the learning transaction. For example, Flannery (1995) argues that three of the main theories of adult education--"andragogy, self-directed learning, and perspective transformation"--focus heavily on the individual and do not recognize the value of groups. She observes that some racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans, place greater emphasis on 'communal values.' Flannery explains, "communal values include knowledge which is valued, how learning occurs, [and] communication patterns of working together for the good of the community" (pp. 153-154).

If we look beyond some of the traditional models and formal approaches to learning, there are many ways to examine the learning needs and habits of African American adults. Any discussion of self-help must include adult learning and development for African Americans, the interplay of race, economics, power, and education. This can be achieved through the Africentric perspective. As defined by Guy (1996), the Africentric perspective is a "culturally grounded philosophical perspective that reflects the intellectual traditions of both African and African American cultures. Africentrism is understood as an attempt to reclaim a sense of identity, community, and power in the face of Eurocentric cultural hegemony" (p. 21). Therefore, when focusing on the learning and development of African American adults, learning models that reflect the Africentric perspective

should be considered (Coolin, 1994). Africentric learning models "focus on the development of the racial self and the bond between the individual and the racial group and the impact that racist interactions have on the development of the self-ethnic image" (Colin III, 1989, 1991, p. 58). Colin III notes the work of Cross (1971, 1978), Dubois ([1903] 1969), Parham (1989), and Thomas (1971) that should be considered in the discussion of models for learning and development.

Africentric books present any issue from the point of view of an African American. People who have been oppressed by the European / white perspective and who have come to believe the black stereotypes that have been projected onto them need the redefinition that Africentric books can offer them, because they are too closely identified with the stereotypes to be able to break out of them on their own. In contrast, a general self-help book would simply discuss general rules for how to achieve something, without looking at the hidden barriers that create impossible obstacles for blacks. Africentric self-help books are usually intended for blacks who want to have successful lives and professions in "white America," while still maintaining their African American identity. It is this focus, of reinforcing one's multicultural identity, while also giving one the survival skills for "making it" in the mainstream, that distinguishes Africentric self-help books.

Conclusion

As the self-help literature and mentality invades every area of society, it is important as adult educators to understand this phenomenon and how it affects adult growth and development. This is especially important, as it may provide additional information about adult development, growth, and learning processes for African Americans. Adult education for African Americans must address these in light of Africentrism. Other ethnic self-help models such as those of immigrants to America, can also be used to establish new strategies for adult education.

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