

## LEADING EDUCATORS SERIES

# An Interview with Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu

Interview by:

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*JAAME's Urban Education Section Editor Stanley L. Johnson Jr. recently had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Kunjufu-- noted author, prominent advocate, social justice activist, and author of the acclaimed Countering The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys 4 Volumes, Keeping Black Boys out of Special Education, Raising Black Boys, Reducing the Black Male Dropout Rate as well as several others. The following provides a clear, cogent, and lucid description of their conversation around current issues facing African American Males (and African American students in general) in education; educational policies, the prison industrial complex, and finally, Dr. Kunjufu shares his sentiments about what can be done to change the current state for young Black men.*

### **On the Current Condition of African American Males (AAM) in Education**

*SJ: What Do You Feel Is the Most Pressing Issue Facing AAM Students Today?*

JK: First I want to thank you Stanley and JAAME for this wonderful opportunity. I am delighted to speak to JAAME and happy to be part of the advisory board. To answer your question, I believe we have to look critically at those who are teaching our children, particularly our African American Males. Statistics show that only 6% of our teaching profession is African American. Of this, only 1% is African American Males. 83% are white and female. There has been a 66 percent decline in African American teachers since 1954. And it is quite interesting to think about this because while Jim Crow (and its damaging affects have had a lasting impact with respect to racism and segregation in this country), it actually was beneficial for my generation precisely because college educated Blacks had limited options; they were trained to become teachers or ministers. Therefore, our best Black minds were trained to come back to our communities and work to uplift and educate us.

I am a consultant for closing the racial achievement gap. Many teachers believe the reason for the GAP is due to income, single-parent homes, and parental apathy. And some even believe it is genetics. When I work with school districts, the vast majority of them believe that these indicators are responsible for the pervasive achievement gap. However, I believe that it is none of these. None of these factors teachers control, and yet they love to give these reasons because it takes them off the hook. With respect to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) along racial lines, we find that Whites (1600), Asians (1582), Latinos (1391) and African American (1291) have these scores<sup>2</sup>. What does this suggest and tell us? The problem is not the above-referenced indicators and factors. The problem is a lack of Time on Task. (We have wonderful examples of how this is working well with our students with the *Knowledge is Power Program* (KIPP). It should also be noted that Eurocentric curricular and instructional practices do not work for our children.

The company that I started (African American Images, Inc.) developed Self-Esteem Through Culture Academic Excellence (SETCLAE), a culturally relevant curriculum for students and teachers. We have seen tremendous growth with many charter schools that have adopted and applied SETCLAE principles at their respective schools. Since 1988, test scores have improved over 40% and the longitudinal data clearly demonstrates that culturally relevant activities and curricular approaches really do work best with and for our children. And finally, I am a proponent for single gender schools.

*SJ: What is your philosophy of education?*

JK: Raising teacher expectations, increasing time on task, understanding that children have different learning styles, making curriculum more culturally relevant, and advocating for single gender classrooms.

*SJ: Can you speak to any factors that contribute to the continuing crisis of AAM student achievement?*

JK: My latest book *Understanding Black Male Learning Styles* (coming later this year) addresses this question and so many others about the “crisis” that so many have began talking about when examining African American Males and the “achievement” gap. It is interesting to see how gender works when understanding this especially when making sense of the racial gap in education. When we have a 92 % percent female teaching profession (of which 83% are white) and a female designed classroom, we have to think about how this contributes to this “crisis.” So the issue is not always racial, but a gender argument must be addressed. For example, let’s take the case of the overrepresentation of males (African American Males in particular) in Special Education. It is well documented that many African American Males have been labeled as “special education.” The vast majority of these instances are relatively behavioral and have absolutely nothing to do with their intellectual ability.

### ***Gender and Special Education***

We are beginning to see that even white males are being placed into special education at a 2:1 ratio. For African American Males, this ratio yields 4:1. What I still find to be relatively

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<sup>2</sup> Represents arithmetic mean scores for groups referenced.

alarming is that teacher and teacher education programs are cognizant of this information (and have been aware of this for such a long period of time) and yet little to nothing is being done to counter and disrupt this gender imbalance. In my book on Special Education, I offer 86 mainstreaming strategies for the classroom teacher to implement under the supervision of a pre-referral intervention team.

### ***Teacher Training in Male Learning Styles***

So, yes, there is and remains a gender conversation along with race that cannot be dismissed. Teacher education programs must train teachers to understand this phenomena and work to change this. Since we know that males do not learn like females, we do our children a disservice especially when we spend so much time and resources in creating the same educational settings that have been historically unsuccessful for our male students. Therefore, we really need to think about how the overrepresentation of males being placed into remedial reading categories, along with increased dropout rates, all stem from what I believe to be from a profession that has ignored gender differences in learning styles.

### ***Female/Male Maturation in Literacy Development***

If we know that girls mature faster than boys, then our school systems should not expect our boys to learn at the same rate as girls. We know that a large percentage of students are not in special education because of their intellectual abilities, and because of ADD or ADHD. We all know that they are there because they have not mastered reading at the same time as girls. If we provide literature for boys, then we can address this problem. My company African American Images has produced a set of male engaging books called *Best Books for Boys* for each grade level. Literacy is a precursor to special education and also being placed to prison. It is the most important subject and the most important factor affecting males of all races. It is so critical for us to take this very seriously and address this concern from a gendered perspective.

### ***Teachers Unions and Ineffective Teachers***

I want to also suggest that the union control of our school systems contributes to the current fate of African American males becoming disengaged. My argument is not against the governing side, but more about the advocacy and representation given to ineffective teachers. Many educators are not comfortable challenging unions. Former Federal Secretary of Education Roderick Paige has documented this in his research. Paige explains how it takes almost \$100,000 for school systems to legally fight to achieve their objective of removing an ineffective teacher (this amount is doubled in the state of New York).

We have seen a shift around the role of charter schools and their approach toward closing educational gaps for African American males. The film *Waiting for Superman*, coupled with the recent successes of charter programs, can be seen as an excellent model for African American Males and is something that we should further consider. For example, the principal and leadership of charter schools can pick and choose their staff. This is not the case for public schools where there are a lot of ineffective teachers who are continuing to go through the system without being reprimanded for the moral harm that they are doing to our children. One of every 57 doctors will lose their license. One of every 95 lawyers will lose their license, but only one of 25,000 teachers will lose their license.

*SJ: What are some of the positive things that you see happening with respect to AAM in the educational pipeline?*

JK: Single gender charter schools. For example, in my hometown (Chicago), we are all very proud of the work being doing at the *Urban Prep* and in *New York at Eagle Academies*. And while there are several positive factors that these schools use in their outstanding quest toward creating beautiful and meaningful experiences for African American males, I must say that these schools demonstrate and show that if you have high expectations, good classroom management, and a commitment toward understanding the various learning styles of males, then students will strive and surpass even our own high expectations. All we have to do as educators is facilitate the learning environment and our students will rise to the occasion. The solutions to all of our problems are documented. We just have to apply the research and stop making excuses.

### **Policies and Institutions**

*SJ: Over 1million AAM are in Prison (Prison Industrial Complex), what can the educational community and parents do to challenge and change this?*

We should be clear about the statistics you referenced in your questions. The million you allude to relates to state and federal institutions. However, if we include local jails and those who are on probation, then this increases to over 1.5 million. There is also an 85% recidivism rate for African American Males who, at some point of their lives, will enter back into our penal system. What is also interesting is that 60% of these men are there for drug related crimes. There was a 100:1 crack to cocaine (sentencing). Congress recently reduced it to 18:1. Given this, there is no real rationale for why those who are arrested for crack cocaine receive greater sentences for those who are caught with powder cocaine. Implicit in this is a class analysis because those who are poor and low-come who have to resort to drugs and drug use (i.e. crack is cheaper and therefore more pronounced in our inner cities) have to contend with the fact that they will eventually be dealt harsher sentences if they are both arrested and convicted for falling victim to drug use.

In 1979 only, there were only 100,000 Black males in our judicial system. Thirty years later, we are looking at 1.5 million. How else can we explain this obvious increase if we don't take seriously to looking at the correlation between the crack and cocaine sentencing?

### ***Concerning the Drop Out Crisis***

When you have a dropout rate of 53% for our African American Males nationwide, the real tragedy lies for those who are illiterate (or barely functionally literate) for those who are within the ages of 16-30years of age. If you are within this age group and are and do not have a high school diploma (and nowadays a college education in many instances) what economic options do you have? Thirty years ago, the options weren't that good, but in some cities—where there were manufacturing jobs—one could still manage to get jobs that would allow them to take care of their families. I believe that those who are serious about educating our children must consider three basic things:

1. Teach African American Males to read when they are ready. We can't force African

American Males who are not biologically ready to read.

2. We have to teach our African American Males that there are alternatives to selling crack cocaine.

If I were a principal or superintendent, no student would graduate from my school or district without first understanding the role of wealth. Students would have to learn about entrepreneurship, real estate, and the stock market before they graduate.

*SJ: What are some structures that schools and colleges can have in place to ensure a successful matriculation for high school African American students preparing for college?*

JK: The first thing we have to do is abolish social promotion. If you retain a child of any race, there is a 50% chance that child will not graduate. If the child is held back twice, this increases to 90%. Conventional conversations about retaining students is that it will affect their self-esteem—that it will hurt them more than help them socially and emotionally. However, this type of rhetoric contributes more toward widening the current educational gaps. Most schools and districts acquiesce to this that results in many students enrolled in courses (i.e. 9<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra) and cannot compete because they do not have the foundational skills (not to mention the literacy and academic language and content specific skills) needed to become successful. What is interesting, however, is that a school will retain a child and the very next year gives that child the same teacher, curricula and pedagogy.

I believe that if a student fails, then so does the schools. The schools have to make changes based on what their data reveals. The failing student should be placed into a Master Teachers classroom, considered for a single-gendered classroom or school, be given extended opportunities to learn (or placed into schools that have an extended school day, and have access to cooperative learning environments to address this issue.

We have to re-look at special education. Why are we calling it special education because research shows that these students who are tracked into special education almost never enter back into mainstream classes. What percentage of students actually exits special education?

*SJ: What advice would you give to parents/guardians raising AAM?*

JK: When I was growing up, the greatest influences on me were my parents, school, and the church. Now, African American Males are influenced by peer pressure, television, rap music, and video games. You need to know your child's' friends. Listen to their music and watch television with your son and monitor the video games that they play.

### ***Coaching and Mentoring***

Every African American Male needs to be exposed to a coach in an organized manner versus “alley ball” and street games. I make this distinction because students who have coaches learn discipline, goals, and have an adult mentor. Street ball does not afford discipline whereas structured sports makes students adhere to them.

***Absence of African American Fathers***

Only 32% of our boys and girls have their fathers in the home. The million dollar question remains: Is the village strong enough to educate and raise black boys when only 32% have their fathers in their home? We do not as a people have the resources to raise the 68% of students who are growing up with no father in the home. That is why it is critical to develop relationships for African American males with coaches and mentors.

Another issue that I think is at the heart of this is the role that mothers play in raising their African American males. The problem that we have is that some mothers are raising their daughters and loving their sons. Their daughters are much more responsible. You do not tell a nine year-old that he is the man of the house. As a result of doing so, we have large numbers of adult males still living at home with their mothers.

*SJ: Any final words of wisdom that you would like to impart to our members and general readership?*

*JK: We need more programs like Call Me Mister<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting to note that South Carolina, as a state, represents one of the poorest states in the United States. However, they have made tremendous efforts to provide scholarships, monies, mentors, and resources to mentor our young men. Seems to me that California, Maryland, New York, Connecticut, and all the other states can do the same.*

There are schools where there is not one African American male in the building. If we do see them, they are either a custodian, security guard, Physical Education teacher, administrator or secondary school teacher in grades 7-12. This is a problem because our young men need male teachers in primary and intermediate grades. Boys need male teachers before their test scores decline and lose interest in school.

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*Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu has authored 33 books. He is an educational consultant to school districts and a speaker at many colleges, organizations and churches. His work has been featured in Ebony and Essence Magazine, and he has been a guest on BET and Oprah. He is also a frequent guest on the Michael Baisden show.*

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about the “Call me MISTER” program, please visit <http://www.clemson.edu/hehd/departments/education/research-service/callmemister/>