

Schools need broader cultural approach, consultant says

By Teresa A. Parsons

Studies show that black boys as a group may be among the best and brightest third-grade students in the country.

But the same test scores that illustrate their early potential show that, by the time the average black boy reaches junior high school, his growth has too often been blighted.

A child who scored in the 63rd percentile on achievement tests in third grade, for instance, may have dropped to the fourth percentile by the seventh grade. In the interim, his skills may not have advanced even a single grade level.

What has happened in the meantime is what Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu terms the fourth-grade syndrome — a conspiracy to destroy black boys.

An educational consultant with Chicago-based African-American Images, Kunjufu offered a workshop last Friday, March 13, at Blessed Sacrament School, for more than 200 teachers and administrators from urban Catholic schools, which are attracting increasing numbers of black students.

Kunjufu believes that, both consciously and unconsciously, the American educational system has failed many black students by not recognizing or accommodating their needs and cultural differences, and by shackling them with low expectations.

'Education is more than reading, writing and math. It should first of all give you identity. Identity will give you purpose. And purpose will give you goals.'

— Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu

The system's failure, combined with the breakdown of family structures, the growing influence of peer groups and the scarcity of black role models, exacts an economic and human toll that Kunjufu believes should concern not only blacks, but entire communities.

Compared to the \$2,300 average annual cost to the federal government per pupil in the Headstart program, he noted, the federal prison system spends an average of \$38,000 to support an inmate for one year.

"You either pay me now or pay me later," he said. "It's much easier to educate than to incarcerate."

Fourth grade is generally the point at which the elementary school curriculum begins to slow in pace, becoming more sedentary and increasingly oriented toward "left-brain" skills, such as math and science, Kunjufu explained. Achievement tests, meanwhile, tend to measure analytic and reasoning abilities rather than artistic or creative development.

As a result, "right-brain" oriented students and those with a high energy level begin

to run into trouble. An average 85 percent of all the children channeled into special-education classes during a given year are black boys, according to Kunjufu. Many other black children are labeled as hyperactive.

"It may not be that black children are hyperactive. It may be that your methodology is too slow," he said. "This high energy level that could have been a strength is now being viewed as a weakness."

"The problem is that we have large numbers of teachers using a left-brain approach with right-brain-oriented children," he explained. "We need a whole-brain curriculum."

A former teacher and counselor, Kunjufu stressed that teacher expectations are the key to students' achievement. He claimed that too many teachers allow a student's race, income, gender and appearance to influence their expectations of his or her academic performance.

"You cannot teach a child you do not love. You cannot teach a child you do not respect. And you cannot teach a child you do not culturally understand," he said.

Beyond merely instructing children, Kunjufu said that teachers ought to be coaches who motivate children to learn. "You cannot teach a child who does not believe in you and who does not believe in your goals," he said. "Education is more than reading, writing and math. It should first of all give you identity. Identity will give you purpose. And purpose will give you goals."

One reason Kunjufu offered for the lack of identity among black children is that Western culture offers a European-centered view of world history that minimizes the contributions of other races.

"Are you really teaching world history and multicultural studies, or are you just teaching black history for one month out of the year?" he asked.

"Europeans want their children to be very clear that civilization originated with the Romans and the Greeks. But those people studied the Egyptians ... Egypt is in Africa, so why aren't Egyptians considered Africans?" he asked.

"What happened to the people who built the pyramids and who now live in projects?"

Kunjufu said that black children are frequently embarrassed when talking about their history. "Do you and I know how it feels to look around your classroom and see the pictures of our country's all-white, all-male presidents?" he asked the mostly white audience.

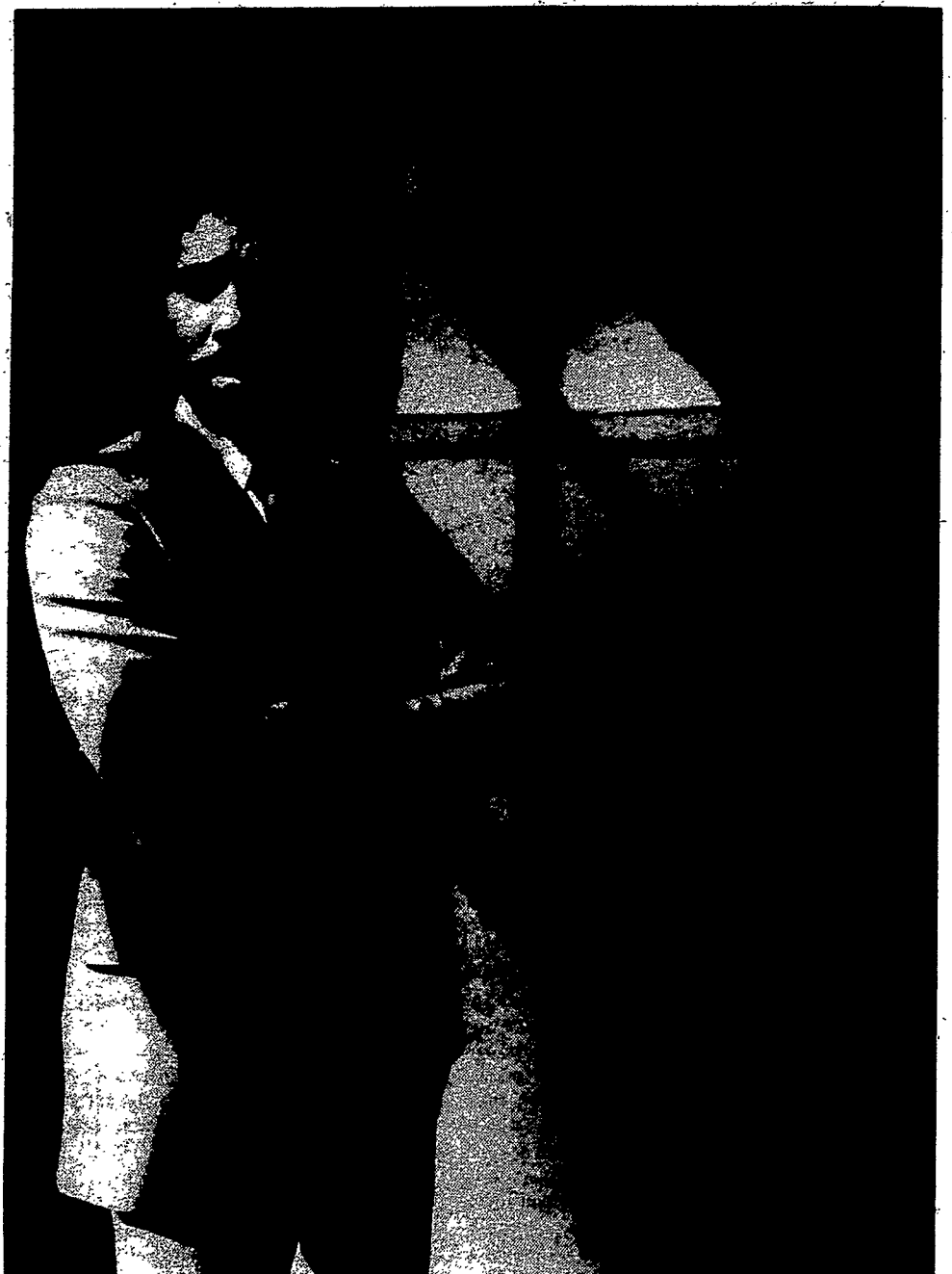
By failing to provide an education free of cultural bias, schools harm not only black or Asian or native American children, but all children.

"Many of us have been given the wrong story," he said. "We need to be honest with all of our children."

Kunjufu does not blame teachers exclusively for the failure of schools to educate black students. Peer groups, which are fast overtaking family, church and school in influence, do not reinforce the importance of academic achievement.

"The black peer group believes they are better in athletics than academics," he said.

"The average black student will go one-on-one with any white kid, but he's scared



Jeff Gouling/Courier-Journal

Educational consultant Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu told teachers that cultural bias in America's educational system is a form of racism so entrenched that society no longer recognizes it as a disease. He spoke at a workshop for Rochester's urban Catholic educators last week.

stiff to compete in the laboratory.

"Right now, our children believe drugs, music and sports are the way," he added.

Meanwhile, parents are frequently relinquishing their traditional rights and responsibilities as the primary educators of their children, by substituting financial support for involvement.

Kunjufu speculated that growing numbers of black, non-Catholic parents are sending their children to Catholic and other non-public schools because they believe the teachers are more dedicated and because they expect that paying for education will somehow ensure that is a better product.

"There are a lot of parents who feel that writing a check is their way of being involved," he said.

Instead of blaming one another for the plight of black students, Kunjufu suggested

that parents and educators cooperate in helping children to identify and develop their talents. Parents and teachers also need to demonstrate that their educational goals offer the potential for success, by offering role models whom black children can look up to and respect.

Given that 67 percent of black children live in single-parent, female-headed households and that 80 percent of teachers are women, Kunjufu asserted that at least some of those role models should be men.

"We've always been encouraged to sing, dance and play basketball. But how many of our boys know one black doctor or one black lawyer?" he said. "If you're going to sell black children on being a black engineer, then you've got to show them a black engineer."

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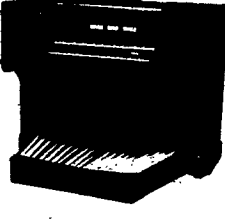
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