

WHEN DOING NOTHING BECOMES A VIABLE LIFE AND CAREER OPTION: A GROWING TREND AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH^{*}

Anthony Harris

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0[†]

Abstract

The prospect of completing high school and continuing one's education at a vocational, two-year, or four-year institution continues to elude a large number of African American high school graduates (Minorities in Higher Education Twenty-first Annual Status Report [2003-2005], ACE). The expectation of pursuing gainful employment through the private sector after graduation has also been diminished, due, in part, to factors external to the individual, such as limited job availability, limited job skills, and limited training opportunities (The State of Black America, 2004). There are additional external factors that explain the existence of waning expectations and eroding prospects for the future of African American youth, including discrimination, poor role modeling, dysfunctional communities and schools, lack of parental engagement, and lack of governmental responsiveness.

In addition to the aforementioned external factors, there are other contributing factors that are principally ipsative and internally-based, including low aspirations, reduced motivation, and a sense of hopelessness. Regardless of whether limited and non-existent expectations are the result of external factors, internal factors, or a combination thereof, many African American youth have eschewed traditional educational and vocational pursuits and replaced them with the growing tradition of idleness, which is most notably characterized by individuals incessantly walking the streets, and habitually doing nothing productive. In many communities, this tradition has become inveterate and institutionalized to the point that it perpetuates itself over generations. And it holds enormous appeal for youth who have low aspirations and expectations for themselves, have given up hope for a positive future, or have come to embrace doing nothing and idleness as normal and worthy of adoption.

This article addresses both internal factors, (e.g. low aspirations, low expectations, and lack of hope) and on external factors, (e.g. discrimination, racism, and poverty), in attempting to explain the phenomenon of idleness, i.e. walking the streets, and doing nothing, which essentially involves idleness and absence of a discernible, visible, legitimate means of financial support. Contemporary and historical contexts are presented, as a means of gaining a more comprehensive view of this problem. Moreover, in an effort to be both descriptive and prescriptive, the author also describes solutions that can successfully address the phenomenon of idleness and doing nothing.

^{*}Version 1.1: Nov 21, 2006 4:34 pm -0600

[†]<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

Historical Context

Opting for doing nothing has not always been a part of the African American experience. Since the arrival of the first slaves in the 1600s, African Americans have strongly held to an ethic of hard work, personal sacrifice, and high achievement (Applebaum, 1998). The principles of respect, restraint, responsibility, and reciprocity governed all interpersonal, communal, and familial interactions (Sudarkasa, 1996). A strong belief in never bringing shame to the race dictated private and public behavior by individuals and groups. The oft-quoted African proverb, It takes one woman to have a child but it takes a whole village to raise a child was more than a catch phrase or a book title. It was at the core of personal, familial, and communal value systems, which were the principal drivers of all individual and group conduct and behavior.

Despite the hardships of slavery and the subsequent Jim Crow laws that continued the subjugation of freed slaves, African Americans clung to the time-honored values of hard work, sacrifice, perseverance, and achievement. Whether the call was for intellectual pursuits as advocated by W.E.B. Dubois or for vocational pursuits as advocated by Booker T. Washington, African Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s responded positively to that call (Dubois, 1903). Working with one's hands or with one's intellect, the duty to do something constructive and positive resonated deeply in the hearts and minds of millions of African Americans, who despite unfathomable hardships and unfavorable odds, persevered and staked their claims to the American dream. Simply stated, doing nothing was in conflict with the ancestral traditions of industry, hard work, and fostering pride in the group.

From 1900 to 1960, over 4 million African Americans participated in The Great Migration, leaving the hopelessness and racial oppression of the South and migrating to the urban centers of the North seeking a better life and a better living wage. Proud and industrious black men and women who once toiled in the cotton and tobacco fields of the South eagerly sought out factory jobs in the North that provided a much better standard of living and allowed them to escape the oppression of Jim Crowism (The African American Mosaic, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam008.html>).

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the early 1970s, the struggle for racial equality exploded throughout the South. As a result, enormous gains were made in the areas of voting rights, job opportunities, fair housing, and public accommodations. For example, Titles II and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to deny public accommodations and employment to individuals based on race and gender, respectively. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated what became known as Affirmative Action, when he issued Executive Order 11246, which essentially made it illegal for federal contractors to discriminate against job applicants based on race. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 ensured the right of all citizens to register and to vote. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 made it illegal to discriminate in the sale, rent, and financing of a dwelling based on race. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Griggs v Duke Power Company* eliminated the use of irrelevant and culturally biased psychological tests in the promotion and hiring of black workers (*Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, 401 U.S. 424 [1971]). Such tests were used as tools to discriminate against black applicants and as barriers to upward mobility for black workers in factories all across the country.

After the enactment of these laws and court rulings, the death grip that Jim Crow once held on the lives of millions of African Americans slowly began to fade. Black people were no longer required to ride in the back of city buses, were no longer denied the right to register to vote, and were no longer denied decent housing because of their race. The massive and unprecedented civil rights struggle and the accompanying changes in civil rights laws of the 1960s permanently elevated African Americans to first class citizenship.

Contemporary Context

In contrast to previous times, currently there is very little shame and few sanctions associated with idleness, unless it devolves into criminal activity. Instead, there appears to be certain desirable rewards and benefits associated with idleness and doing nothing. For example, idlers generally have a place to live, eat three meals a day, have money in their pockets, and avoid the hassles of the daily grind of an eight-to-five job. Impressionable high school students observe their neighbors, relatives, and friends spending their days doing nothing, traversing from one location to another, or becoming quasi-permanent fixtures at a favorite hang-out. More often than not, drug activity - both sale and use - is present in these scenes. In fact, it is common for someone as young as twelve or thirteen to earn as much as \$3,000 in a two-day period from the sale of drugs (Levitt, et.al., 2000). I had a discussion with a freshman high school student who earned that

amount about his drug business. I wondered how he could make that much money in such a short period of time in a community that was so poor. His explanation indicated that he sells wholesale and retail. He sells to other drug dealers and to drug users. He finally abandoned his drug business after a customer showed up at his home asking for rocks (crack cocaine) in exchange for two horses. The ubiquity of such negative images and the dearth of positive images influence the choice students must make between doing something and doing nothing, the latter of which becomes extremely attractive, especially for those who see very little incentive in choosing the former. In fact, the lure of earning more money in a weekend than teachers earn in a month becomes an enormous challenge for interventionists to convince a young person to stay in school, take school seriously, graduate, and pursue a legitimate career.

There are multiple societal factors that have the potential for impeding personal and professional achievement, e.g., institutionalized racism, poverty, and discrimination; however, these factors have been present for generations and will likely continue for generations to come, given their insidious and pervasive nature. For example, limited job opportunities, lack of job skills, and discriminatory hiring practices have contributed to high rates of idleness and unemployment among African Americans. The official unemployment rate for African Americans tends to hover around 10% (Congressional Black Caucus, 2004). The idleness rate, as measured by the number of individuals who did not work at all during the year, is 25% for African American males, a strong indication of a growing unemployment crisis in the African American community (Sum, et. al., 2004). The data also suggest a growing family and community crisis, as unemployed and idle men seldom become strong fathers, husbands, and community leaders.

If one accepts the premises that racism, poverty, and discrimination have deep historical roots in our society, that they have a perpetual and permanent presence in our society, but more importantly, that they are surmountable, then they can be faced with confidence, competence, and determination. Thus, the daunting challenge for African Americans, as it has always been, is how to deal effectively with the harsh realities of racism, discrimination, and poverty without allowing them to become obstacles, crutches, or excuses. Despite routine exposure to these unrelentingly harsh realities, how does one rise above them and choose the option of doing something over that of doing nothing? To this question, many African American youth have responded by demonstrating perseverance, determination, and refusal to lose hope, in the spirit of DuBois and Washington. Others have responded by giving in to the urge to give up; and consequently, have spiraled down to a place in their lives that is devoid of hope, in contrast to the spirit of DuBois and Washington. Further, the existence of caring adults or lack thereof, has also contributed significantly to the polar opposite responses by African American youth.

Spiraling Down of African American Males

As monumental as the gains in civil rights were in the 1960s, it is possible that this era also represented the line of demarcation between the ethos of doing something and that of doing nothing. An examination of this era lends credence to such an assertion.

As the struggle for equality and integration shifted to the public schools following the Brown Decision, the stature, presence, and influence of many black schools and black educators, particularly in the south, changed forever (Fultz, 2004). In many communities, Black schools were closed or became grade-specific attendance centers, resulting in many of these institutions losing their unique cultural character and their long-standing status as the center of the social and academic life of the Black community. The consequences of losing such important institutions have been profound and have resulted in an academic and social void that has never been completely filled.

Not only did the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s mark the end of de jure school segregation in the South, it also marked the beginning of what can be called the ongoing spiraling down of African American males. As a direct result of the closing of Black schools in the early 1970s, many Black educators, most of whom wielded an enormous influence on the lives of African American students, particularly males, became displaced or were relegated to less authoritative and less visible positions in most southern school systems (Fulz, 2004). Consequently, their remarkable and unique ability to influence young black males noticeably diminished. Under the traditional black school structure, black teachers, principals, shop teachers, and football coaches served as mentors, role models, and disciplinarians. For example, if one of these educators encountered a young man who was misbehaving, invariably and unabashedly, (s)he would confront the

young man and immediately affect a discernible change his behavior, which often consisted of a very pointed reprimand along with a sternly delivered promise to tell the young man's parents. The message was strong, clear, and unequivocal: Boy, if you don't straighten up, I'll snatch a knot in you and make sure your mama and daddy know what you've been doing. The young man would heed the warning and would likely show contrition, followed by a desperate plea to his disciplinarian to not tell his parents. The person meting out the punishment did so because of an implicit understanding that an educator's role in the "village" also included helping raise that young man and ensuring that he obeyed the rules of proper deportment. Following school desegregation and the closure of black schools, most of these black educators lost the opportunity to utilize their unique gift for providing that special blend of discipline and love that kept many a wayward youth on the straight and narrow.

Filling the discipline gap caused by a disruption in traditional ways of administering discipline were white educators, most of whom lacked the experience and sensitivity to deal effectively with young black men. (reference/resource (perhaps you can reseach school discipline before 1954) Generally, their response to dealing with misbehaving young black men was in the form of indifference, outright racism, or an overwhelming sense of fear of and intimidation by young black males. (reference) As a result, some young black men tended to push the boundaries of acceptable decorum and got away with behaviors and attitudes that were not allowed under the tutelage and auspices of Black educators. In the process of transitioning from a predominantly Black educator presence and influence to a predominantly White educator presence and influence, the standards of academic, behavioral, and attitudinal acceptability were lowered. Consequently, among a group of African American students, there emerged a lack of authentic appreciation for the values of respect, responsibility, restraint, and reciprocity and for the ethics of hard work, sacrifice, achievement, and perseverance. The lowering of academic, behavioral, and attitudinal standards, along with the lack of appreciation of traditional cultural values and codes of ethics melded into a strong and negative influence that has contributed heavily to the trend in which growing numbers of African American youngsters routinely opt for doing nothing.

Interventions that Work

As founder of a mentoring program in a small northeast Texas community and as a school board member in that same community for fifteen years, the author came to realize that early intervention was essential if young people were going to realize the value and benefit of doing something. Project Keep Hope Alive, an after school mentoring program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, focused exclusively on African American boys in grades K-6. The program attempted to instill in the boys the values of hope, perseverance, respect of self and others, and achievement. For the entire time the program was active (1991 – 2000), approximately 150 students participated in the program.

Project Keep Hope Alive was based on the concept that values drive behavior, and that unless the core value system is addressed, behavior is not likely to change. The program adhered to the belief that unless Black boys are reached with positive intervention by the fourth grade, chances of success later in life become problematic (Kunjufu, 1987). In order to reach the boys and plant seeds of success in their hearts and minds, the program maintained two important traditions. One was to have at least one black man dressed in a business suit speak to them each week. The primary purposes were to demonstrate to the children that black men wearing suits do not all work for the police department; and that indeed, there are lots of successful, positive black men whom they could emulate. They did not have to look only to negative images of black men for a clue as to how an ideal or successful black man looks, talks, and dresses.

Another tradition was that the daily mentoring activities took place after school at the campus of the local university. By being on the campus four days a week year round, the children were constantly reminded that college was a real possibility for their lives.

As children, they were eager to please adults. The program Keep Hope Alive took advantage of that eagerness by setting high standards of conduct and academic performance. Children were required to bring homework to meetings, even if they had already completed their work at school or if they had none assigned. This requirement was based on the belief that unless students could read, write, and do math effectively, their life options would be severely limited.

All program participants and adult volunteers were required to adhere to three non-negotiable rules,

which reflected the founder's bias about acceptable behavior; 1) Belts had to be worn, with shirts tucked neatly inside pants, with no underwear showing, 2) No one could use the N word; and 3) Fighting was not acceptable. The idea of not using the N word became so internalized that the boys developed a daily habit of reporting how many times one of their friends had used the N word that day.

The program also had a strong foundation in the arts, which was based on the belief that the arts, including performing, martial, photography, and drawing instilled discipline and an appreciation for creativity and the aesthetics. The excellence of their art reflected a strong sense of creativity and imagination and resulted in notable public accolades. Their black and white photographs were displayed in the campus art gallery, the choir performed with the Boys Choir of Harlem, and several children won numerous martial arts tournaments.

Perhaps, the best testament to the success of the program occurred when the children were taken on a field trip to a museum in Dallas. The docents' initial reaction to forty black grade school boys approaching the front door was utter fear. Their facial expressions indicated that they were afraid that this "menacing looking" group of youngsters would come in and literally tear the place apart. Instead, about midway through the tour, a docent asked how we got the kids to behave so well. The reply was that it was very easy. The Project Keep Hope Alive staff expects them to behave well. Anything else is simply unacceptable. She was told that when expectations are raised, children will live up to them; and by contrast, if expectations are lowered, they will surely live down to them. She remarked that earlier she had to ask a group of high school students to leave the museum because of their disruptive behavior.

In addition to meeting acceptable standards of conduct, the children also met and exceeded academic expectations by consistently scoring high marks on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the state-mandated achievement test. (The testing program is now called Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills – TAKS.) The overarching goal of Project Keep Hope Alive was the academic improvement of students in the program. Anecdotal as well as empirical data indicate that the Project Keep Hope Alive was successful in achieving that goal. Such success must be viewed in the context of the school's as well as parents' roles in helping the students improve their academic performance.

Data from the school district's Academic Excellence Indicator System (Commerce ISD, 1992-1999) showed a marked improvement in the percentage of African Americans who met the state's minimum standards on the TAAS. The percentage of African American students who met minimum standards in reading in grade four increased from 26% to 59% from 1993 to 1994. For the same grade level and for the same time period, the percentage meeting minimum standards in math increased from 8% to 33%. In grade three, the percentage of African American students who met minimum state standards in reading increased from 47% to 53% from 1994 to 1995. For the same time frame and same grade level, the percentage that met minimum state standards in math increased from 20% to 53%. For students in the fourth grade, the percentage that met state minimum standards increased from 50% to 73% and from 50% to 73% in writing. From 1995 to 1996, the percentage of students in grade 3 who met minimum state standards in reading increased from 53% to 59%. Math scores also increased for fourth graders, 27% to 59% from 1995 to 1996. The percentage of students in grade five who met minimum state standards in math from 1995 to 1996 increased from 47% to 50%. From 1995 to 1996, the percentage of students in grade 6 who met minimum state standards in math increased from 36% to 55%. The percentage of students in grade 3 who met minimum state standards in reading and math from 1996 to 1997 increased from 59% to 64% and 46% to 59%, respectively. In grade four, from 1996 to 1997, the percentage of students who met minimum state standards increased from 40 percent to 70% in reading, 72% to 80 percent in writing, and 59 percent to 70 percent in math. In grade five, from 1996 to 1997, the percentage of students who met minimum state standards in reading increased from 46% to 50% and 50% to 70% in math. From 1997 to 1998, the percentage of students who met minimum state standards in reading increased from 64% to 81%. From 1997 to 1998, the percentage of students in grade four who met minimum state standards increased from 70% to 72%. Perhaps, the most impressive growth occurred from 1998 to 1999 for 3rd grade students in reading and for 6th grade students in math. The percentage of students who met minimum state standards increased from 66% to 100% and 96% to 100%, respectively. With few exceptions, children in Project Keep Hope Alive opted for doing something, whether it was being truck drivers, college students, or military enlisted men. Psychosocially and academically they

were more prepared to meet the challenges of career, college, and family than if they had not participated in the program. In a recent visit with several students who were participants in Project Keep Hope Alive and are now young adults, I was heartened by the impact that the program had on these young men. The day after delivering a keynote speech at the local university, I had an occasion to speak to a young man who was leaving a classroom in the College of Business. When he saw me, he immediately spoke my name and asked how I was. I could not remember his name, but his face was very familiar. He told me his name after he realized I was not going to come up with it. I asked what he was doing. He said that he was working on his degree in business. He then said that he was in college because of Keep Hope Alive. He said that had it not been for Keep Hope Alive, he would have never considered college. I told him how proud I was of him and so pleased that our program was successful in doing what it was intended to do. On another occasion, I was a young man at a local fast food restaurant. I did not remember his name either. He walked over to my car and spoke my name with a greeting. After he told me his name, he reminded me that he was in Project Keep Hope Alive and that he had one of the hardest heads of any of the boys in the program. I smiled and agreed with him. One of his favorite topics as a child was how to do a drive-by shooting. He idolized gangs, guns, and violence. He said that he is now working as a salesman and taking care of his family. He went on to say that the principles we taught him in Project Keep Hope Alive eventually started to make sense to him and that over time he opted for a much different path in life, away from guns, gangs, and violence to one of commitment to his family and to his role as a responsible and proud black man. I asked about his wife and kids. He said, no sir; I am not married. I am talking about my mom and sister. That was a moment that is frozen in time because here was a young man standing before me who was on his way to prison or the cemetery and is now being a role model and a productive citizen. Project Keep Hope Alive claims credit for saving that young man's life.

Years later, as a consultant with a small school district in southeast Texas, the author had the opportunity to discuss the do nothing and the do something options with a group of African American high school juniors and seniors who were at serious risk of doing nothing when or if they completed high school. As consultant, the author's role has been to encourage, motivate, and hopefully inspire students to do remain in school and to do something positive with their lives after high school. Topics of discussion covers an array of issues that affect today's African American males, including how to effectively respond to overt acts of racism, how to appropriately diffuse a potentially volatile confrontation, and how to, metaphorically, aspire to be the owner of the trucking company and not just to be the truck driver. In addition, there are discussions regarding etiquette, formal greetings, and the importance of avoiding the use of the "N" word. All activities are directed toward helping each student develop a healthy sense of self, an unwavering respect for self and others, and a clear commitment to good decision-making.

School administrators noticed a trend in which there was a precipitous drop in state achievement test scores of African American students, especially males, after they reached the freshman year of high school. Each year, prior to the freshman year, their test scores consistently met or exceeded state minimum standards. There was consensus that the drop in test scores was not due to a lack of ability. Instead, it was more likely due to low expectations, low aspirations, and an insidious attitude among students that doing nothing was okay. Many began to accept the notion that if they were unable to get into college or to find a job in town, walking the streets and doing nothing would be a viable alternative.

In meetings with the students, discussions involving the doing nothing problem in their community were pervasive. Part of the discussion dealt with whether they and their friends would choose the do nothing or the do something option. They were unanimous in their assessment that the problem of doing nothing was huge in their community and had been around for many years. After a ten-minute drive around the small, economically depressed black community, one is able to observe numerous examples of just how prevalent idleness and doing nothing have become. Scores of young black men have not only dropped out of school, but also seem to have dropped out of a cultural system that relishes industry and hard work. They have resigned themselves to the idea that doing nothing is okay.

Students were able to think of only a hand full of African American students, most of whom were athletes, in the past five years who went on to successful college careers. Although a community college is forty miles away and a four-year college is less than an hour's drive away, those institutions might as well be in another

country. The likelihood of even visiting one of the campuses had become about as likely as winning the state lottery as far as some students and parents were concerned. Instead of envisioning themselves receiving a college diploma, many of the students had emblazoned in their impressionable minds the omnipresent images of young black men walking the streets, selling drugs, and doing nothing. Each student confessed that such a lifestyle was abhorrent to him/her and vowed to never end up like that. They all expressed the heart-felt desire to opt for doing something positive with their lives, while they predicted that the majority of their classmates would opt for doing nothing.

There is anecdotal evidence that suggests that the students are responding positively to this intervention. Each week students inquire about when they can meet and talk. Like the young children of Project Keep Hope Alive, these older children crave the attention and involvement of positive adults in their lives. They consistently receive the message that they can achieve despite the pervasiveness of idleness in their community and despite their current economic condition.

In addition, the administrative staff and teachers constantly remark about how much a difference the intervention has made in the lives of students at that campus. The staff and faculty appreciate having someone outside the school district reinforce some of the same lessons about life and learning that they have attempted to share with the students.

Although most of the work is done in small groups, one of the most poignant moments came during an emotionally draining one-on-one conversation with an African American male student, who embodied the notion that positive attitudes and behaviors were beginning to emerge among many of the students. “Joseph’s” story is similar to that of others in his school. Members of his family have maintained a tradition of doing nothing for decades. Over his short life time, he has witnessed scores of relatives and friends succumb to the temptation of doing nothing, walking the streets, and engaging in criminal activity. With tears rolling down his face, and his voice cracking, Joseph said that he is determined to make something of himself. He said that he wanted to end the cycle of negative behavior in his family and that he longed for the day when others in the community would respect his family name. He said that most people in the community think about only negative things about his family because of its reputation. He said that he is studying hard, working after school, saving his money, and trying to be a role model to younger members in his immediate and extended family. Joseph vowed that despite being poor and having no one in his family to support his dreams, he is determined to go to college and become successful. With a hug and a handshake, he thanked the author for spending time with him. His success will eventually touch the lives of others in his family and community and cause them to follow his example.

Another poignant story of a troubled young man further illustrates the importance of intervention programs such as this one. While sharing in group about some of the challenges and rewards of being a young black male, one student, who is normally very talkative, was saying very little. After the group left, “Andre” shared that he was losing his focus and that it was really hard to explain. He stated that he wanted to go to college and that the “streets” were making him lose his focus. (The “streets” is a euphemism for activities associated with doing nothing and hanging out with friends, associates, and dealers of all sort, who do very little, except engage in a variety of idle and illegal activities.) He continued in a trembling voice that the pressure seemed even greater because he did not have a father figure to talk to about what was going on in his life. “Andre” was an athlete and projects a strong macho exterior and posture when he was with other young men. As we stood facing each other, I told him that I could be that father figure. His eyes turned red with tears. A familiar smile came to his face. I reached out, shook his hand, and gave him a hug, and told him that I would be there for him. As he wiped away the tears with the end of his shirt, he thanked me and went to his next class.

This was a breakthrough moment for him because such an admission and display of emotions are inconsistent with the image of being tough and macho. This story and many like it also reflect the lack of resources available to young men who want and need father figures with whom they can interact and who are expressly positive, black, and male. The lack of available father figures is evidenced in the school, the home, and in the community. In the school setting, staff is typically busy with paperwork and other routine business associated with the management of a school, e.g. discipline, schedules, NCLB, and state testing. In the home setting, too many fathers have abandoned their roles as positive role models or have abandoned

the family altogether. In the community setting, many black men are modeling the wrong type of behavior and have forgotten that they have an obligation to help raise the children.

The students crave the time spent with a positive black male role model, discussing issues related to life in general, being black, being a man, and being a leader. In their worldview, there just are not enough black men who are available and willing to offer themselves as role models and father figures, in the home, the school, and in the community.

Remaining Barriers and Solutions

While there are signs of progress, a tremendous amount of work remains in order for these and other students like them to fully embrace and internalize the notion of doing something. One such barrier is communications skills. A contributing factor is the trend for many students to avoid reading because of a strong dislike for reading. Many students avoid reading, especially textbook reading, because they believe that the reading assignments are too lengthy. Some do not read because there are not enough textbooks for everyone to take one home. Any reading that is done is typically short in length and is more likely to relate to a brief sports story in the newspaper or in a magazine. Without a desire and ability to read, communications skills are reduced. The ability to write and speak clearly, utilizing a comprehensive vocabulary becomes diminished. Expressing oneself in a coherent fashion and understanding the language and meaning of others becomes problematic. For example, the students must come to understand that referring to someone as “fool”, “dog”, and “nigga” is not acceptable in the work place, although they use them as terms of endearment in the social setting. For many decades, the use of the N word has conveyed a message of hatred, contempt, and hostility toward a race of people whose skin pigmentation is dark. Randall Kennedy (2003), however, discusses the various ways in which the term has been used, historically and contemporaneously, to convey an array of meanings. For example, in addition to its historical oppressive meaning, the term is used in literature for authentication purposes, as in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*. Today, in the hip-hop and rap music genre, the term is frequently used as a term of endearment and as a means of de-fanging its poisonous qualities. Even among whites, the N word is used in referring to other whites as a term of endearment; yet, others continue to use it as a slur. Nevertheless, the term has generated debates about freedom of expression in art, music, literature, and speech.

My point to the children with whom I work is that the word is profane, hurtful, and reflects a limited vocabulary. My seventh grade Social Studies teacher once told my class that people who use profanity suffer from a limited vocabulary. Therefore, the N word is off-limits. Moreover, it does not take very long for the children to internalize that belief about the inappropriateness of the N word. A fourth grade child, who is part of a new intervention program that I have started, used the word with a friend. Immediately, everyone in hearing distance of the child reacted by reminding him that he is not supposed to use that word. He later apologized to the student for using the N word with him.

Another barrier is the lack of role models who can speak with credibility to young people about the value of doing something positive with their lives after graduation. Most young people will respond positively to an honest voice that encourages them to make good choices about their lives. For example, a reminder of the life-enhancing benefits of a college education along with a description of the earning differentials associated with a high school diploma and a college degree will sometimes generate enough interest to cause some to seriously consider college. For those who do not want to go to college, having someone speak to them who works a blue collar job and provides a decent living for his/her family will sometimes motivate someone to seek a job or career that will support a family. For students who seem hard to reach with the message that they can do something positive with their lives, persistence becomes an important strategy. Odds are favorable that a persistent message of hope along with a genuine message of love and concern will eventually penetrate the hearts and minds of such students.

More effort and attention must be focused on younger children in kindergarten and elementary grades. Intervention programs and activities designed to instill positive values and expectations in children will, in the long run, yield benefits that will likely manifest themselves in positive behavior, in both the short and long term. Adult idlers today did not set as a life goal at age five or six to become idlers. Rather, while they were young, not enough was done to encourage, motivate, and inspire them to be successful. Instead, the seeds of despair and idleness were unwittingly planted and nurtured.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the solutions to the emerging and growing trend of young African American youth doing nothing become a matter of making and implementing prudent choices. As a society, we can choose to invest on the front end of life with intervention programs such as Project Keep Hope Alive, the high school intervention program, or other local initiatives that attempt to be proactive and are more cost effective and humane. (See table 1 contains a partial list of intervention programs for at-risk children. The effectiveness of each program has to be evaluated on its ability to address the unique challenges and concerns of each local community. Therefore, the author does not necessarily endorse these programs.) Or we can choose to continue to pay more on the back end for the rising costs associated with incarcerating a disproportionate number of African American males, which is ineffective, socially and financially irresponsible and grossly inhumane. According to The Sentencing Project (2003), one in every eight African American males, 25-29, is incarcerated on any given day. Today, there are more than 900,000 African Americans in jails and prisons. When the Brown Decision was handed down in 1954, there were only 98,000 African Americans incarcerated, indicating that since that time, there has been a significant increase in the crime rate; there have been significant changes in sentencing laws, making the possession of crack cocaine a more serious crime than possession of powder cocaine, for example; racism is unabated; and there continues to be a myriad of internally-focused maladies such as hopelessness, idleness, and low aspirations.

The financial and human costs of incarceration are staggering. For example, when calculated over a prisoner's life time, the cost for maintaining that prisoner is approximately one million dollars (The Sentencing Project, 2003), a figure that places severe strains on state budgets and reduces the availability of funds for other spending priorities, such as education. For each dollar spent on education, four are spent on incarceration (The Sentencing Project, 2004). In addition, there is little or no financial benefit associated with such a huge capital investment, except for the employment of prison staff and the local economies that depend on prisons for their economic survival. In addition, an idleness rate of 25% and an employment rate that routinely hovers in the double digits result in a reduction of gainfully employed workers (Alternative Schools Network, 2004), who pay into the Social Security Retirement System, thus reducing the level of funding available for future retirees and benefit recipients. According to the United States Social Security Administration, in 1950, there were 16 workers paying into the Social Security Retirement System to support one retiree. Today, 3 workers pay into the system to support one retiree. By the time today's 20-year olds are ready for retirement, there will be two workers supporting each retiree (http://www.strengtheningsocialsecurity.gov/need_for_action.shtml).

Early intervention efforts designed to encourage African American youngsters to opt for doing something positive with their lives will ultimately improve the quality of life for everyone. While it is important to emphasize individual responsibility when designing intervention strategies, it is also important to remain vigilant in matters of racism, classism, and societal indifference. A one-sided intervention strategy is likely to result in failure and a perpetuation of the status quo.

The added challenge for educators and other stakeholders is to go beyond criticizing and lamenting the idleness of our youth and the obvious lowering of standards. We must move past criticism and engage in solutions and interventions that work because we can be reasonably assured that the problem is not going to go away by itself. By exercising vigilance against racism, classism, and societal indifference and simultaneously engaging in activities that raise aspirations, expectations, and standards and instill hope for the future among marginalized youth, the entire community benefits. By not doing so, the entire community suffers. Dr. W.E.B. Dubois explained this contemporary challenge in the early 1900s when he asserted, "I must become my brother's keeper; for if I do not, then he will surely bring me down in his ruin."

References

Alternative Schools Network (June 2004) Trends in black male joblessness and year-round idleness: an employment crisis ignored. American Council on Education (February, 2005). Annual ACE Report Shows Minority College Enrollment Continues to Climb, but Gaps Still Persist. Retrieved March 17, 2005 from <http://www.acenet.edu/hena/readArticle.cfm?articleID=1223>¹

¹<http://www.acenet.edu/hena/readArticle.cfm?articleID=1223>

Applebaum, H. (1998). *The American work ethic and the changing work force: an historical perspective*. West Port, CT: Greenwood Press.

Congressional Black Caucus (September 2004). *State of the black economy*, Congressional Black Caucus Foundation

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin Group

Fultz, Michael. (Spring, 2004). *The displacements of Black Post-Brown: An overview and analysis*. Retrieved April 1, 2005 from http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/heq/44.1/fultz_2.html²

GRIGGS v. DUKE POWER CO., 401 U.S. 424 (1971). Retrieved April 5, 2005 from <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/401/424>.

Kennedy, R. (2002) *Nigger The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. New York: Pantheon Books

Levitt, S.D., Venkatesh, S.A. (2000). *An economic analysis of a drug-selling gang's finances*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 756

National Urban League (2004) *The state of Black American*. Retrieved April 6, 2005 from <http://www.nul.org/publications>

Social Security Administration (2005). *Social Security: Need for action*. Retrieved April 11, 2005 from http://www.strengtheningsocialsecurity.gov/need_for_action.shtml⁵

The African American Mosaic. *Migration* (September 2004). Retrieved April 5, 2005 from <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/af>

The Sentencing Project (December, 2004). *New incarceration figures: rising population despite falling crime rates*. Retrieved March 5, 2005 from <http://www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/1044.pdf>⁷

²http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/heq/44.1/fultz_2.html

³<http://laws.findlaw.com/us/401/424.html>

⁴http://www.nul.org/publications/index.htm#state_of_black_america

⁵http://www.strengtheningsocialsecurity.gov/need_for_action.shtml

⁶<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/afam008.html>

⁷<http://www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/1044.pdf>