

# Eliminating the Cave Experience

Building the Bridge to Self-Efficacy for Black Males

**Dr. Candace L. Lynch-Wilkerson<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> The University of Maryland Eastern Shore

## **Abstract**

*The origin of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy are essential for self-identity and must be pioneered within the public education comprehensive curriculum to enhance academic success for Black male students. If our systems remain stagnant without the promotion of self-efficacy, the Cave Experience for African American males will continue to impact their social-emotional well-being from kindergarten unto adulthood. Black males must gain a deeper understanding of their cultural and historical contributions to promote, preserve, and gain a perspective of what perseverance and progress looks like while embracing high academic self-efficacy standards.*

# Introduction

The experience for Black males in elementary, middle, and high school does not always come with honor roll lunches with the principal, student of the month rewards, certificates, strong positive daily affirmations, or full-ride academic scholarships. Their school and classroom climate may not exhibit the nurturing culture that is significant for their academic welfare. This article provides insight into building self-efficacy within Black male students to safeguard them with strategies as they face repetitive barriers, microaggressions, and systematic emotional trauma impacting their self-worth within their communities and academic motivation within their schools.

Albert Bandura's (1977) seminal theory reports that the role of self-efficacy, including one's self-image as a learner in the context of academic achievement, cannot be ignored or trivialized. Systematic racism, microaggressions, and discrimination have embedded multi-faceted situations, events, and sabotaging actions that have impacted Black males' academic self-efficacy in their school environment. According to Bandura (1997a) and proponents of the self-efficacy theory, student self-efficacy is a situation-specific belief that students have about their ability to organize and execute the actions required to learn and master tasks and assignments at a satisfactory level (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Teaching Black males how to organize and execute any assigned task, whether at home, work, or school, can enhance their ability to be successful in any endeavor.

How are we preparing our Black males to execute assigned tasks and master content efficiently? At every level of our educational system, Black youth from the age of five years old unto pre-

adulthood of 18 years of age have experienced walking in the deep shadows of darkness. Whether they have endured social-emotional physical wounds, scrapes, bruises, or blatant injustices, they have been scorned. The vicious bites and attacks, destroying their character, self-worth, and self-confidence, plague their minds, revisiting their cumulative trauma. Similarly, Ronald Franklin Ferguson (2010) confirmed that Black boys are criminalized as early as the third grade, which, like “adultification,” acts to construe Black boys as a problem and threat in need of control, ensuring that “their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naivete” (p. 83).

## **Implementation of Self-Efficacy**

To be downcast on their academic ability as they travel through the narrow cave of educational grief sends a cast away message. It’s time now for equitable educational embracement and retribution. Anne Gregory, Dewey Cornell, and Xitao Fan (2011) and Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen (2012) emphasizes that low expectations, deficit perspectives, and overall poor student-teacher relationships are commonly associated with behavioral problems, classroom management difficulties, academic disengagement, poor academic outcomes, and dropouts. The cave experience for many Black males consists of fear, depression, resentment, disgrace, shame, and self-doubt. Can you imagine walking in a dark, narrow, molded cave filled with uncertainties for twelve long years? As a result, this deficit orientation about the capacity of Black males has resulted in teachers having low expectations of success for these students (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Kotok, 2017; Menchaca, 1997; Warren, 2014).

Self-efficacy in Black males builds intrinsic motivation, cultivates confidence, expands historical knowledge, and enhances self-love, influencing high expectations of goals, moral standards, and beliefs toward academic achievement. Bandura (1997b) pointed out that perceived self-efficacy plays a key role in human functioning because it affects behavior not only directly but also impacts other determinants, such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments and opportunities in the social environment. Angeliki Leondari and Vasiliou Gialamas (2002) conducted research on domain-specific perception of self-efficacy, as a result the study showed that students who felt competent were able to attain academic demands and had an optimal achievement. Educators, parents, mentors, and community stakeholders must transform their self-belief, self-confidence, and self-worth by implementing self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy by way of other-fathering and other-mothering.

If we want to see better outcomes for Black males, an academic village has to be created and developed to teach crucial self-management practices on how to rebuild, redeem, restore, and retain Black male pride, self-identity, life purpose, and self-worth. In the Claremont Letter, Mary Poplin, John Rivera, Dena Durish, Linda Hoff, Susan Kawell, Pat Pawlak, Ivannia Soto Hinman, Laura Straus, and Cloetta Veney emphasized that highly effective teachers were strict but nurturing, demonstrated instructional rigor, connected student learning to their futures, developed strong relationships with their students, and held high expectations for all students. The village will offer profound wisdom, compassion, and devotion. Those purposeful relationships are unlimited, unburdened, and filled with a welcoming disposition, sacrifice, truth, and love. Richard M. Ryan, Jerome D. Stiller, and John H. Lynch (1994) contended that students' perceptions of their

relationships with teachers have a significant impact on their interest in school and their self-efficacy belief system, which in turn promotes their behavioral and emotional engagement in school. Teachers who have made great gains with underserved and underprivileged students have had those non-judgmental, crucial, and sacred conversations that built confidence, trust, and respect. The village instructs and counsels, making deeper connections through conversations, check-ins, counseling sessions, and conferences. As a result, these relationships:

- Employ and emphasize the value of having high expectations so that excellence becomes a habit in their life;
- Examine effective and efficient rigorous culturally relevant historical articles and novels that capture and conserve history in its very existence;
- And evaluate essential and exhilarating high-quality programs, exploring accountability, displaying knowledge, and pledging moral trustworthy statuses.

## **The Benefits of Academic Self-Efficacy**

A series of theorists, including Maxine McKinney de Royston, Tia C. Madkins, Jarvis R. Givens, and Na'ilah Suad Nasir (2021) acknowledged that, "Many Black educators in the United States, themselves once Black children and K-12 students, recognize this double-edged sword of 'safety' and continually place themselves on the frontlines-discursively and physically by denouncing the racialized harm and neglect Black children experience" (p. 70). On the other hand, when Black teachers denounce the harm and neglect committed against them, it impacts the trust, courage,

strong-will and self-efficacy that they built within to believe in themselves.

Many Black males do not believe in themselves or their ability to reach any milestone of academic self-efficacy due to the effects of the cave experience. Academic self-efficacy is a cognitive-motivational belief that involves students' judgments about their abilities to accomplish academic tasks (Bandura, 1997a). Influencing Black males to believe in themselves boldly and firmly through the history that we teach and the representation that we display will bring forth comfort and endowed encouragement to do good work. By contrast, many have been walking in fear, with a heart and mind of discouragement from distressed entrapments and displeasurable encounters.

Black males must feel safe and loved to thrive, engage, and participate in their learning communities; having an awareness of their own abilities removes fear and doubt. Research linking academic self-efficacy with school motivation and performance has reported consistently strong effects (Bandura et al., 2001; Bong & Clark, 1999; Zimmerman et al., 1992; Zimmerman, 2000). Re-establishing a classroom and school climate with sustainable academic self-efficacy will increase academic accountability and ownership of one's education. By gaining self-assurance and relinquishing the diminished mindset, Black males will be able to overcome their deep-seated disbeliefs and challenges.

Carol Dweck (1999) reported that students' views of themselves in academic settings—their academic self-confidence—play a central role in their school achievement. The Self-Determination Theory suggests that supportive school contexts encourage engagement and motivation by fulfilling students' psychological needs (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). I concur that a supportive school village adheres to

the virtues of acceptance, love, respect, trust, self-control, self-confidence, and self-will/ability. Black males must see themselves as achievers, overcomers, and motivators to withstand challenges. A strong other-fathering and other-mothering support system is essential for them to be brave and bold and to believe that they are capable of making great strides in math and reading. The trusted relationships from other-fathering and other-mothering will make it easier for students to receive the teachings of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy. Therefore, school villages are needed to strengthen the purpose, self-worth, self-perception, and self-resilience of Black males. The school village includes teachers, school social workers, school psychologists, secretaries, building services, cafeteria workers, security team members, and administrators. Yes, everybody! The true value of the work that we do is ensuring that all students accomplish and achieve academic success. School villages can enhance a student's connectedness, engagement, and motivation. It builds confidence in Black males by preserving their intelligence with the true fidelity and practicality of academic success.

In the traditional Black family village, future generations are encircled with strength, honor, and power from shared stories and experiences. Today, those traditional villages are either obsolete or dysfunctional. The teachings of self-pride, kindness, morals, righteous deeds, and values prepared youth to become law-abiding citizens.

In conclusion, enhancing Black males' self-efficacy can eliminate the emotional trauma of the cave experience. Success-oriented integration and academic self-efficacy practices within the village will bring everlasting triumph, like the border of every cave that displays a glimmer of radiant sunlight. The school village is essential to the development of confident and competent Black males.

Otherwise, attending school for Black males will continue to be an exhaustive, depressive, micro-aggressive, or oppressive experience. Like captives in a cave, Black males will struggle in a pit of academic despair and sorrow. These intentional or unintentional actions paralyze the minds of their victims in a state of hopelessness. Likewise, the institutionalized trauma will transition into adulthood.



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## About the Author

**Dr. Wilkerson** is a devoted and veteran teacher-leader with a passion for educating Black/Brown males, especially incarcerated youth. In her experience and observations, the classroom environment and experience for African American males is filled with shadows of darkness in what she calls the *Cave Experience*.

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