

2022

No Cap: Unlocking the Self-Concepts of Students to Promote Limitless Identities

Walter Lee

University of South Carolina Upstate, WLEE2@USCUPSTATE.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle>



Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lee, W. A. (2022). No cap: Unlocking the self-concepts of students to promote limitless identities. South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal, 116-120.

This Article is brought to you by the USC Aiken at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Published online: 1 March 2022
 © South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

No Cap: Unlocking the Self-Concepts of Students to Promote Limitless Identities

Dr. Walter Lee 
 University of South Carolina Upstate
 Wlee2@uscupstate.edu

Abstract: If students do not perceive themselves as capable, they will likely decline opportunities that threaten their self-beliefs. This requires educators to create redefining moments for students to experience struggle in a safe environment that ultimately encourages students to remove personal limitations. When teachers are critical about ways to respond to negative, limiting self-concepts, students may conquer breakthroughs in learning. In this article, I suggest that a change in self-concept represents a change in mindset, producing significant learning outcomes. To accomplish this, I will discuss self-concept, self-efficacy, and implications on teaching, using the CARE theory of self-concept development.

Keywords: self-concept, self-efficacy, mindset, learning outcomes

Introduction

In recent years, educators have invested resources in rewriting curriculum, building student stamina, leveraging technology, creating academic tracks, responding to inequities, and implementing interventions to improve literacy. While these are important to educational leaders, the deciding factor of students' performance is not inextricably connected to amount of resources poured into the classroom but rather the combination of students' self-concepts and reflective appraisals of others regarding their succeeding potential. Current literature supports that self-perceptions are powerful and have the power to influence cognition and behavior (Zelenak, 2020). The repetition of negative self-narratives learners replay about their abilities can *lock* the potential to excel beyond past performance. Louise Hay's (2004) work teaches that self-concept can be used as limitations and resistance to change. When learners create a narrative about their learning possibilities, behavior, academic performance, and social interaction all elements of their lives orbit the narrative, responding in accordance with what they believe. Emerging findings in neuroplasticity research support the assertion that educators play a vital role in interrupting students' self-concepts in efforts to transform performance in and beyond the classroom (Boaler, 2019; Jensen, 2009). Thus, the following questions are elevated to dialogue: What if the answer to unlock the learning potential of learners was to intentionally change their beliefs about themselves? What

must educators know about self-concept necessary to uproot personally-enforced limitations? How does self-fulfilled prophecy impose limitations on student progress? How do students internalize subtle messages within the learning community, creating a cap on how much they are able to achieve?

SCAMLE

South
 Carolina
 Association
 for Middle
 Level
 Education

A coined colloquial in the Black/hip hop community, "no cap" is a term often used to express truth or authenticity; in other words, not kidding, no lies. In other contexts, the informal phrase suggests there are "no limits" or "no maximum" on the possibilities. Parallel to the goal of this article, when educators facilitate the unlocking of students' self-concepts, students are equipped to embrace opportunities to demonstrate limitless possibilities in and beyond the classroom. According to Hawk (1967), what a person thinks of himself consciously or unconsciously serves as the determinant of future behavior. Therefore, the pathway to academic achievement is through passionate exploration of self-belief. Enhancing students' perceptions of themselves is the key to upward trajectory in learners' achievement.

A Better Understanding of Self-Concept

Pioneering psychologist, William James, is known for coining the idea of self-concept as he endeavored to understand behavior during the late nineteenth century. The term has been contemporized over the years as researchers and educators seek to better understand the determinants of behavior and academic performance. For example, Epstein (1973) offers self-concept as a theory that one holds of his or herself and their interaction with the world. Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) provide a broad definition of self-concept:

"Self-concept, broadly defined, is a person's perception of his or herself. These perceptions are formed through one's experience with and interpretation of one's environment...and are influenced especially by reinforcements, evaluations of significant others..." (p. 411)

This definition describes how self-concept is initially formed and the reinforcements in daily life through those in social environments. Individuals absorb knowledge of the self from media outlets, reflected appraisals, and social comparisons, which form as an aggregate to confirm and expand their self-perceptions (Kunjufu, 2000; Brown, 2008).

The literature often confounds referents of self-concept by referring to it as self-image, ego, and self-perception. However, simply defined, self-concept is the image that one holds of themselves (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). In all cases, this self-image can be observed through one's selection of tasks, perseverance, and social relationships. Meurisse (2018) offers a more illustrative description to self-concept: the ego, which

he defines as the story that one constructs throughout their lives. Meurisse suggests self-concept relies on things, people, beliefs, and ideas for confirmation. As a result, individuals use their self-concepts as a measuring tool for sense-making. To illustrate further, one who has difficulty on a mathematics exam, could embrace the idea: "I am not a math person; therefore, I never do well at math." This fixed mindset is rooted in the self-concept. Naturally, self-concept seeks to protect and defend itself when faced with something challenging (Fay & Funk, 1995). Rather than learn techniques and employ effective study habits, a learner may use self-concept to as the authorizing story that makes the individual comfortable with the outcomes, justifying their failed attempt.

One should further note that self-concept is complex in that it interprets the gestures and words of others to define the self. Nathaniel Branden's work on self explains how the adolescent determines their self-perceptions in response to adult behavior. When a child is constantly rejected or does not receive love through verbal expressions, nurturing actions, or the celebration of one's being, this is the subtle message the child deduces: "I am not lovable or worthy of love" (Branden, 1994, p. 176). This example illustrates how those who surround the child all play an important part in the shaping of their self-concepts.

Whether a child is challenged by subject matter, struggles with securing friends, worries about their physical shape, or experiences daily criticism in the home, the adult should be mindful that their response to children may reinforce or interrupt a negative self-image. However, this requires educators to be intentional and responsive to enhance the self-concepts of learners in their schools, thus unlocking their personal limitations. To that end, the educators must be aware of the ways their self-concepts manifest in learning environments and create impositions on student growth. That is an idea for a future article.

From Self-Concept to Self-Efficacy

The constructs of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, are often confounded in the literature and particularly used interchangeably (Lee, 2018). It is important to distinguish how these constructs are inter-related, yet dependent of each other in order to better understand how educators may inspire change in children. As mentioned earlier, self-concept is the mental image one holds of themselves. When faced with activities or tasks, the self-concept is transposed and situated within the context of one's ability to achieve or perform. Self-efficacy is significant to human functioning as it impacts, goals, expectations, perceptions, aspirations, and limitations.

Bandura (2006) defines self-efficacy as one's beliefs about their capacity to produce given attainments, which are also linked to distinct realms of functioning. This set of beliefs surrounding one's achieving possibilities may lead one to think optimistically or pessimistically, persevering or resisting challenge. Since self-efficacy is not a universal trait, one may be an outstanding athlete but possess an astronomical volume of self-doubt regarding their reading comprehension. Further,

there is no global measure to determine how students will perform with the various domains of the learning community. The skills and knowledge base necessary for a robotics project differ from effective musical delivery on a school chorus.

Bandura maintains scales to measure self-efficacy must be tailored to the particular domain of functioning that is the object of interest (Bandura, 2006, p. 307). However, there are generic self-regulatory skills to diagnose task demands such as setting goals to guide efforts, deciding a course of action, evaluating progress, and celebrating small achievements in route to the attainment of one's goals. Such benchmarks may be used in multiple areas for students to self-manage anxiety and reframe productive struggle in the classroom. To understand the functionality of self-efficacy, what must be objectively considered are the cognitive mechanisms, which serve as the foundation of behavior change.

To the degree that students are developing, self-reflection constantly occurs between the two indexes of individual efficacy and group efficacy. For example, if a star player were on the front line, a player would judge the efficacy of the team on the basis of the star player's strength and their own. Consequently, the most organic source of information for the perception of self is social comparison (Britner & Pajares, 2006). Learners consider their sex, age, race, previous successes/failures, and reflected appraisals to evaluate their capability to attain particular outcomes, which are the contributing elements that formulate student self-concept. In fact, self-concept is a misnomer; there is little "self" involved in its formation. The milieu communicates (explicit and implicit) messages regarding acceptable behaviors and possibilities of adolescents.

Therefore, the middle school adolescent learns to evaluate the index of self and the group to determine personal limitations. In further consideration, Bandura (2006) speaks to this interdependent nature of the complexity of the two indexes: the individual or the group. Students within a classroom are not monolithic in the unitary sense, but they are dissimilar to a team since individual students' progress does not impact the test scores of other learners. Analogous to teams, however, learners in the classroom represent varied cognitive abilities to be valued in the learning environment. While group efficacy and individual efficacy are moderately correlated, group performance is predictive when analyzing the self-perceptions of group members in comparison to the greater group.

Boaler (2019) argues current educational practice forms barriers through tracking, representing a fixed regime. Tracking is intended to help schools meet the varying needs of students by providing low-ability students the level of instruction needed for their learning through homogenous grouping (Davis-Powell, 2020). With this level of instruction, teachers can easily plan lessons for students without making the lesson any more challenging or engaging. Perhaps, the benefits of tracking predominately rest on the ease of instructional planning versus the growth of students. One of the adverse effects of planning is the rarity of heterogenous grouping, which would allow for differential growth rates.

When students are placed on a track, assumptions are made about students' abilities, social interaction beyond the classroom is limited, and White and Asian students typically benefit from gifted and talented tracks (Davis-Powell, 2020; Boaler, 2019). To that end, tracking is often permanent and fails to compensate for differentiated levels of growth (Hallinan, 1994). Consequently, students in low-ability classes never catch up with their peers. In fact, researchers found that 88 percent of students who were placed on a track remained on the track for the rest of their academic careers (Boaler, 2019). Growth is nearly impossible for students in low-ability groups. When placed in tracks, students may create assumptions about their potential levels of achievement, considering both personal and group efficacy. Regardless of where students are placed, however, it is incumbent of educators to remain sensitive to the growth.

Deflating Limiting Self-Concepts

Fortunately, the self-concept is malleable and can be changed over time. Previous research findings present a range of specific tasks to better inform teacher dispositions that may yield significant impact on the self-concepts of learners. In the absence of a framework for the enhancement of self-concepts, Lee (2020) presents the CARE Theory of Self-Concept Enhancement. The four improved domains of CARE are as follows:

1. **Cultural Relevance and Inclusion** – The teacher sees the culture of students as an asset and intentionally invites their culture to the center of the lesson. Also, the learning environment consists of pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically.
2. **Affirmations & Advocacy** – The teacher celebrates of students' progress and affirmations regarding the individual qualities contribute to healthier self-images. In advocacy of students, the teacher intentionally intervenes to remove barriers, which hinder the growth of students – even if that is their own self-perceptions.
3. **Relationship Building** - The most significant motivator for such students is relationship, which serves as a prerequisite for learning. The foundation for relationships is trust, which is the variable that reduces complexity and increases predictability.
4. **Expectations Unyielded** - Every student's needs are unique. Our expectations should be clear, allowing all students access to learning outcomes. However, teachers should also expect mistakes and respond in a manner that supports students correcting their errors and making more.

For the sake of this article, I seek to focus on the two domain that specifically speak to teacher expectations of students and provide strategies to encourage productive struggle in the classroom environment: *Affirmations & Advocacy* and *Expectations Unyielded*. In the next section of this paper, the

two domains will be discussed with recommendations for classroom practice.

Affirmations & Advocacy

Affirmations are positive words used by teachers to celebrate the progress of students and encourage productive struggle. This is important to the classroom environment as learning requires vulnerability. Affirmations are observable during instruction as simple as giving positive messages to students who may lack self-belief and offering encouragement during struggle. As a result, students should know and feel safe in that the tools they bring to the learning process are adequate. Therefore, when observing behaviors related to perseverance, teachers should applaud the behavior but avoid terms of judgment such as “you’re so smart” or broad accolades such as “good job” (Branden, 1994). Students will rely on the teacher to ascribe value versus reflecting on their progress in achieving said goal. Here are some practical strategies for implementation of the *Affirmations & Advocacy* domain:

- Take time to learn the strengths of students rather making judgments about what they do not have (Boutte, 2015).
- Focus on mastery of skills versus grades (Delpit, 2006).
- Publicly and genuinely announce students' success.
- Recognize areas of strength in each learner and share it frequently to combat negative thinking (Jennings, 2018).
- Celebrate students just as loudly as you correct them; constant correction without positive reinforcement sends the message “you are wrong.”

Expectations Unyielded

“Sometimes you have to believe that others say about your potential until you have the capacity to believe it for yourself” – Dr. Thomas Turner

On the first days of class, the learner consults their self-concepts through personal reflection to decide their grade by the end of the course. The idea of the ending grade reflects their personal expectations for their performance.

Consequently, the expectation of the teacher must exceed the students' expectations in efforts to increase their potential outcomes. Prior to providing strategies to raise the expectation of students in the classroom, it is important to examine one of the primary reasons while expectations are lowered for some students: a self-fulfilling prophecy. Gage and Lierheimer (2012) define self-fulfilling prophecy as an outcome of labeling for students, which acts as a determinant of behavior and academic performance. These labels may be based on race, ethnicity, gender, previous performance, tracking, and socio-economic status. Using the context or situation as a criterion for which students will experience success, teachers may formulate an inaccurate definition of the context and evoke them to become true (Lee, 2018). Interestingly, teacher expectations of students are revealed in the opportunities we

give to students (Education Commission of the States, 2012). If students are to raise expectations for themselves, we must focus on ways in which teachers can challenge their personal limitations. Here are some practical strategies for implementation of the *Expectations Unyielded* domain:

- Address/recognize personal biases and stereotypes that create inequitable learning environments. The teacher must engage in self-reflection to determine how their bias may be projected onto students.
- Use the rational emotive theory (RET) to dispute their irrational beliefs (Ellis, 1975). This theory questions the validity of students' reasoning as it relates to their decisions and self-talk.
- Do not allow students to turn in poor work that does not demonstrate their best efforts conceptually and intellectually. Giving up is easier than persevering. They should not be allowed to give up on their work nor themselves; aim for mastery.
- Use scaffolding to build on what students know in order to arrive at what they do not know (Benson, 1997).

Conclusion

“The leaders must believe in the potentiality of the people, whom they cannot treat as mere objects of their own action; they must believe that the people are capable of participating in the pursuit of liberation” (Freire, 2000, p. 169).

As stated by Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, the liberation of students' minds is vested in the skill of the educator who inspires students to challenge their sense of self. Students may enter the classroom with a limited self-concept, which restricts access to higher levels of achievement. As mentioned in previous sections, if students do not perceive themselves as capable, they will likely decline opportunities that intimidate the self-belief. However, research supports the notion that there is enormous opportunity for growth, as the brains of students will be changing every day of school (Jensen, 2009). Learning can only happen when students are vulnerable within the learning environment and trust that their mistakes are only steps towards the production of anticipated outcomes (Boaler, 2019). This requires educators to create redefining moments for students to experience struggle in a safe environment that ultimately encourages students to remove personal limitations. I suggest that a change in self-concept represents a change in mindset. When teachers are critical about ways they respond to negative, limiting self-concepts, students may conquer breakthroughs in learning. Only then can we unlock the potential of students' learning outcomes and make real the catchphrase: No cap!

References

- Bandura, A. (2006). Guide for constructing self-efficacy scales. *Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents*, 5(1), 307-337.
- Benson, B. K. (1997). Scaffolding. *English Journal*, 86(7), 126-127.
- Boaler, J. (2019). *Limitless mind: Learn, lead, and live without barriers*. HarperCollins.
- Boutte, G. S. (2015). *Educating African American students: And how are the children?* Routledge.
- Branden, N. (1994). *The six pillars of self-esteem*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Incorporated.
- Britner, S. L., & Pajares, F. (2006). Sources of science self-efficacy beliefs of middle school students. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 43(5), 485-499.
- Brown, B. (2008). I thought it was just me (but it isn't): Making the journey from “What will people think?” to “Am I enough?” Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House.
- Davis-Powell, S. (2020). *Introduction to middle level education*. Pearson.
- Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. The New Press.
- Education Commission of the States (2012). Teacher expectations of students. *The Progress of Education Reform*, 13(6), 1-7.
- Ellis, A. (1975). Rational-emotive therapy and the school counselor, *American School Counselor Associations*, 22(4), 318-328.
- Epstein, S. (1973). The self-concept revisited: Or a theory of a theory. *American Psychologist*, 28(5), 404-414.
- Fay, J. & Funk, D. (1995). *Teaching with love and logic: Taking control of the classroom*. Love and Logic Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gage, N. A., & Lierheimer, K. (2012). Exploring self-concept for students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders as they transition from elementary to middle school and high school. *Education Research International*, 1-11.
- Hallinan, M. T. (1994). Tracking: From theory to practice. *Sociology of Education*, 67(2), 79-84.
- Hay, L. L. (2004). *You can heal your life*. Hay House.
- Hawk, T. L. (1967). Self-concepts of the socially disadvantaged. *The Elementary School Journal*, 67(4), 196-206.
- Hoge, R. D., & Renzulli, J. S. (1993). Exploring the link between giftedness and self-concept. *Review of Educational Research*, 63(4), 449-465.
- Jennings, P. A. (2018). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. Norton & Company.
- Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. ASCD.
- Kunjufu, J. (2000). *Developing positive self-images and discipline in black children*. African American Images.
- Lee, W. A. (2018). Self-concept is a thing: Exploring Title I middle school teachers' alignment to self-concept enhancement pedagogy for African American students. (10809733) [Doctoral Dissertation, Clemson University]. ProQuest.
- Lee, W. A. (2020). Ayo, teach! How high: Teacher expectations as a determinant for student success. *Teacher Education Journal of South Carolina*.

- Meurisse, T. (2018). *Master your emotions—Transform your life: A practical guide to conscious transformation, emotional well-being, and spiritual growth*. Lulu Publishing Services.
- Shavelson, R. J., Hubner, J. J., & Stanton, G. C. (1976). Self-concept: Validation of construct interpretations. *Review of Educational Research*, 46(3), 407-441.
- Zelenak, M. S. (2020). Developing self-efficacy to improve music achievement. *Music Educators Journal*, 107(2), 42-50.



About the Author

Dr. Walter Lee is an Assistant Professor of Middle/Secondary Education at the University of South Carolina Upstate and Campus Coordinator of the Nationally Acclaimed Call Me MiSTER Program. Dr. Lee's research agenda emphasizes self-concept development strategies for African American learners, which include intersectionality of poverty and race, color-evasiveness, equitable instructional practices, culturally relevant pedagogy, and cultural competence. Dr. Lee teaches courses on curriculum, instruction, and assessment and has presented locally and nationally on his ground-breaking theoretical framework for developing positive self-images in African American (and all other) learners. Ultimately, MiSTER Lee believes his work on self-concept inspires "healing through love and critical insight."

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1673-272X>

Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Lee, W. A. (2022). No cap: Unlocking the self-concepts of students to promote limitless identities. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 116-120.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: 1 March 2022

© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education