

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL IN A SECONDARY CONTEXT

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Introduction

In their paper, *Identity and Agency in Nonschool and School Worlds*, Hull and Greeno define positional identity as, “the variety of ways in which individuals are entitled, expected, and obligated to participate in the practices of a community.” They then define voice as, “...ways in which individuals present and represent themselves to others...” (2006, p. 78). When applying these definitions to students in school, however, one does not have to look far to find instances where a student’s positional identity and voice may clash. Many students struggle to reconcile their self-expression with the expectations of their school. This has manifested in several ways, including students and their advocates fighting against school dress codes they deem to be discriminatory, advocating for inclusive spaces for LGBTQIA+ students, and pushing against discriminatory academic language such as “standard English” (DaCosta, 2006) (Schey & Uppstrom, 2009) (Alim & Smitherman, 2012). As the United States’ school system currently stands, students go to school to learn, and are often expected to do so quietly. In limiting student voice, schools eliminate a key player in a development of students – the students themselves. While untapped potential could be attributed, in part, to the

silencing of student voices, that is not the sole cause. Untapped potential is also the by-product of a school system that has struggled for decades to adequately meet the needs of all of its students in a timely manner (Graham, 2007). At its core, untapped potential is a people problem that occurs when there is greater investment in the system than in its students.

As students, especially adolescents, are defining who they are, they must also consider the expectations of the prominent figures in their lives. In the process, they are losing time that could be spent developing skills and talents, while they reconcile their personal identity with the one that is expected of them. Developmentally, it is a rite of passage for adolescents to discover their sense of self and their ability to shape their identity, and then make decisions on how they would like to shape their identity. That is one of the hallmarks of adolescence. However, it is difficult enough for students to discover their own identity, without adding an additional layer that consists of them assimilating to or assuming another identity that is expected by adults in power (school officials, parents, community members, etc.). While there are some adolescents that align with the preferred identities of US school systems, many do not, and adolescents lack the self-awareness and metacognitive skills necessary to determine that they are grappling with a decision that they should not have to make. In the tumult of high school, they may also be unaware of the ways in which their identities are being shaped by the assumptions and biases of the adults in their lives. These pre-assigned destinies occur when adults project their assumptions about students' positional identities and future outcomes through their interactions both inside and outside of the classroom, often with little consideration for the voices of students themselves. Pre-assigned destinies are often informed by stereotypes or anecdotal occurrences that adults deem to be applicable in general situations.

All the while, students are matriculating through the school system, often in an environment that encourages them to strive to meet the expectations of their schools, perhaps at the expense of their own. This raises important questions about the skills students are failing to gain or develop during the course of their schooling, when so much of their time in school is spent trying to reconcile competing expectations. What untapped potential leaves schools every year when educators are more invested in the system than they are in the students? Most importantly, what are the lasting implications of untapped potential for students after they graduate from high school?

In the context of this study, untapped potential refers to 1) the skills that are underdeveloped as students matriculate through the education system and 2) the dreams that students are not given the opportunity to discover or are discouraged from pursuing. Schools are not solely responsible for uncovering untapped potential in adolescent students. In fact, some might argue that schools should focus on teaching

basic information that aligns with the curriculum. However, students spend an average of approximately 7 hours per day, five days per week, in school. (Craw, 2018) This means that many students spend more time in school, than they do in any other single space. If that is the case, we as educators do our students a disservice, if we do not try to tap into the potentials that they have.

In this study, I interviewed three higher-education professionals. During these interviews, my participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as students in the United States K-12 system, giving specific attention to their middle and high school experiences. While the participants did answer questions related to their specific school experiences, they also discussed other aspects of the educational experiences, such as the involvement of their parents and their extracurricular activities. These external influences are important to note, because while teachers and school educators are the driving force behind student's educational outcomes, they are not the only force.

Following an analysis of the results of this study, I conclude with discussion and centering around how to address untapped potential in the context of secondary schools.

Methods

Participants and Limitations

For the purposes of this study, I interviewed three higher-education professionals from a private university in the southeastern region of the United States. During interviews, each participant reflected specifically on their experience as students in the K-12 school system. I had several reasons for this choice, including the following: 1) Untapped potential is not something that is identified in students in any systematic way while they are in school. Since they have not completed their K-12 education, it is impossible for current students to say what skills were not identified and developed during their experience in the K-12 system. For this reason, adults who have completed their schooling can provide the perspective of hindsight. 2) Teachers, currently working in schools, may be uncomfortable with the assertion that they have, as a group, been unable to help students uncover their full potential in the school setting. In fact, the purpose of this study was to examine perceptions of untapped potential and why it remains unrealized. I wanted to avoid placing professional guilt on teachers, who are often seen as the primary educators of students, and thus responsible for their academic and personal development. 3) Higher education professionals have strong understanding of the knowledge and skills students need to be successful *after* completing K-12 education. For this reason, they can provide a valuable perspective on

K-12 education. For the purposes of this study, all names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Participants

Julio is a 32-year-old, cisgendered Latino male. He spent his middle- and high-school experience in northwest Indiana, where he remembers prominent school segregation. His first language is Spanish, and he immigrated to the United States from Guatemala when he was 10 years old. Teresa is a 28-year-old, cisgendered white female. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania, and remembers being marked by her low socio-economic status, especially as she attended boarding school. Naomi is a 30-year-old cisgendered Latina female, who completed a majority of her K-12 education in New York City and Western Kentucky. Her first language is Spanish and her family is from Puerto Rico.

All participants identify as able-bodied; none identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. There are several identity groups that are not represented in this study, which warrants further investigation. Nonetheless, this study presents three different examples of the concept of untapped potential and its impact on students into adulthood.

Measures and Procedures

At the start of this study, I was working within a community of higher education professionals and used convenience sampling to gather participants. I conducted and recorded a separate 18-25 minute interview with each participant. Each responded to the questions outlined in the Appendix. After collecting data, the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify major themes, supporting details, and impactful quotes from each interview. After synthesizing similarities and differences between the interviews, outside literature was pulled in to provide additional context for the various accounts.

Results

Julio, Teresa, and Naomi had vastly different K-12 experiences ranging across various regions of the United States. However, there were some parallels related to their perceptions of their own untapped potential and the role of schools. Analysis of the interviews led to four findings on untapped potential. 1. Teachers are not solely responsible for identifying untapped potential in their students and should not be held solely responsible for teaching students necessary skills such as critical thinking. 2.

Critical thinking skills are a commonly untapped potential. 3. Students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds finish school with untapped potential, suggesting that financial resources are not the primary factor. 4. Personal one-on-one relationships that encourage students to participate in leadership opportunities are described as being integral towards discovering untapped potential.

Teachers are Not Solely Responsible for Identifying Untapped Potential

Uncovering untapped potential is not solely up to teachers. Students often have a variety of other supportive adults in their lives besides teachers, including, but not limited to, parents, religious community members, coaches, supervisors, advisor, siblings, and extended family members. These adults cannot be viewed as independent of one another, however. Maxine Greene nicely explains that, “unlike an artist or a scholar or a research scientist, [the teacher] cannot withdraw to studio, study, or laboratory and still remain a practitioner” (as cited in Higgins, 2011, p.7). Teachers are arguably most effective when they are working with the community members involved in their student’s lives.

Parental involvement, in particular, plays a key role in success in uncovering untapped potential. Teresa talked about this in her interview, reflecting on her experience in boarding school with friends whose parents were both similar and different from her own.

Trevor, who I used to carpool with... his parents were similar to mine and really pushed him in school... so even though we both came from low to middle income families, we both did well there and thrived... But then I look at another friend of mine, Ryan, whose parents were not as involved in his schooling. He didn’t have a great relationship with them, and they just didn’t emphasize academics as much.

According to Garcia and Thornton (2014), “Ongoing research shows that family engagement in schools improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism, and restores parents’ confidence in their children’s education. Students with involved parents or other caregivers earn higher grades and test scores, have better social skills, and show improved behavior.” This is evident in Teresa’s reflection of her secondary experience, and the experiences of many students across the nation. In her interview, Teresa talked about her parents often encouraging her to excel in school. For the entirety of her middle- and high-school experience, she was more invested in making good grades, because that was the expectation of her parents.

Critical Thinking Skills as a Common Untapped Potential

Looking back, Teresa reflected that her secondary education, “didn’t prepare [her] to think on [her] own.” She recounts being more invested in attaining good grades than cultivating critical thinking skills. Similarly, Naomi also felt that her K-12 experience left her without critical thinking skills, saying, “...critical thinking, analytical thinking wasn’t anything that I learned in the K-12 system. I learned that in my Master’s program.” [A3]

In their 2011 study, Marin and Halpern assert that, “the development of critical thinking skills is often listed as the most important reason for formal education because the ability to think critically is essential for success in the contemporary world...” (p.1). While there are several bodies of educational research on the importance of developing critical thinking in secondary schools, it also is important to note that medical research shows, “...adolescence and young adulthood are recognized by brain researchers as optimal for the development of higher order cognitive processes” (p.1). In encouraging the development of critical thinking skills, “student real-life role-play, the use of case studies, group discussion, and student-instructor interaction are among the most effective means of developing critical thinking skills” (Marin et. al, 2011, p. 4). While some of these activities can be facilitated in the classroom, and blended with content instruction, others cannot, further reinforcing the fact that untapped potential is not, solely, a teacher problem.

Students of Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds Finish School With Untapped Potential

It has been well-established that lack of wealth, invested professionals, quality teachers, and overall resources has a significant effect on student outcomes. The research that supports this fact is undeniable, as “... some students from disadvantaged backgrounds simply do not have access to social and cultural capital” (Miles, 2007, p. 506). However, while terms and labels such as *inner-city schools*, *Title One schools*, *urban schools*, *urban students*, *at-risk*, *low socioeconomic status*, etc., encourage educators and community members alike to view disadvantaged students from a deficit lens, often examining what they lack, the mirror is rarely turned on the affluent. While better funding leads to tangible improvements such as better books and better buildings, there are some things money simply cannot buy.

In interviews, both Teresa and Julio discussed that they went to the well-resourced schools in their respective areas, but still described leaving high school with untapped potential. When asked what they lacked upon leaving those schools, none of the issues they listed were directly related to resources or lack of funding. For instance, Julio said that he graduated without knowing how to take personal responsibility

towards his academics, which led to him skipping class often in college. Julio also mentioned that he lacked personal skills and financial management skills when he left high school. Teresa reflected that her school failed to prepare her for conversations around difference.

“I almost felt like there was so much untapped potential in high school... there could have been spaces that did facilitate [conversations] between people from different... financial backgrounds, for example.”

Each of these accounts supports the next finding, which demonstrates that untapped potential is less about financial resources and more about the quality of student-adult interactions.

Personal One-on-one Relationships are Integral Towards Discovering Untapped Potential [A5]

In this study of untapped potential, there was only one finding that was common across the three participants. Each of them attributed at least some of their untapped potential to the lack of a mentor in their life.

Naomi. I never had someone to dive a little bit deeper into where I lacked, because it wasn't a part of the curriculum.

Julio. I think there was a lot of room for growth and development in high school. had I had the professors, or the instructors that invested in me.

Teresa. I know personally, I had the motivation, I just didn't have...mentorship. Perhaps if more adults would have invested in me, to identify [skills], and say, 'you should really get involved here.' That would have been helpful. I started to get more of that, and in the years I can see how that has helped me, and I didn't always have that back then.

These three professionals were once students in K-12 schools, like millions of children across the nation. While they are professionals with a total of six degrees between them, they all agreed that they had some sort of untapped potential upon leaving high school. Some even commented on the lasting implications of not exploring their own interests. Naomi, for instance, is unsure that she would have chosen education, if she had received more adult encouragement to pursue her interests in law and science.

“I'm in education now because I selected it and because it's what I've been exposed to, but I do wonder, if I had access from K-12 to different types of fields that I never even knew existed, if I had direct access to those fields and I was able to align what I'm naturally talented in, what would I be today?”

While in previous accounts, the participants talked about lacking skills, Naomi's inability to explore passions that she did not know about directly connects to what she considers to be her untapped potential.

Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate the role of strong relationships in the development of student potential. With that in mind, this article emphasizes the importance of mentorship for school-age students, particularly during their secondary school experiences. The three participants in this study described the importance of having to effective mentorship. A caring and responsible adult who asks the right questions, listens to student's voices, and encourages talents and opportunities can unlock untapped potential in young people, after genuine relationships have been forged.

There is untapped potential left in students when they leave high school. Those talents and skills, undiscovered for number of reasons, can go on to be untapped potential for years. This can lead to lasting implications as small as students changing their major several times in college until they discover their talents or as large as advancing in a career for years only to find that their skill set lies somewhere else. Student potential is often perceived to reflect the effectiveness of school teachers, and while teachers are not the only influences in students' lives, it is true that students spend a considerable amount of time in schools. Yet the reality is that not every educator can be expected to mentor every student all of the time. However, just because one cannot reach them all, does not mean they should not try to reach some or encourage students to seek support from other adults in their lives.

As seen from the participants in this study, untapped potential manifests in different ways from one student to the next. Though one commonality amongst all of the participants was the lack of opportunity for them to use their voices as students, being silenced had varying implications for each of them later. Some of these included not being prepared to think independently or critically, being unable to have critical conversations, and finding difficulty in managing after-high-school, adult tasks such as managing finances. These varying experiences with untapped potential, are due in part to the unique set of intersecting identities that each of my participants shared with one another, as seen when synthesizing the interviews. Again, it should be noted that this study warrants further investigation into untapped potential and how it can manifest in different students, will special consideration given to the identities that they hold.

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Appendix

1. Think about middle and high school. What was the environment like for people you were close with? (Friends, siblings, teammates, etc.) Specifically think about their identity spaces and how that affected their experience.
2. Reflect on your experience in schools, specifically in middle and high school. What kinds of school did you attend? What was the environment like? What were your general feelings about school? Consider your sociological identity and how that may have been an influencer.
3. What do you feel like your schools (teachers, curriculum, administration, career counselors, coaches, etc.) prepared you for? And in contrast, what were some things that you felt you lacked when leaving K-12 education?
4. What skills have you identified within yourself, that you realized after high school? Why do you think you developed these skills after high school? Do you consider any skills to have been untapped potential for the K-12 contexts in which you were situated?