

The Power of Student Agency: Looking Beyond Grit to Close the Opportunity Gap

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Title: The Power of Student Agency: Looking Beyond Grit to Close the Opportunity Gap

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The Power of Student Agency lies at the nexus of practice, research, and storytelling. It is a response to the concept of “grit,” identifying how structural barriers can limit student success even if one possesses grit. Author Anindya Kundu contends that grit does not equal success, but rather that agency and grit are complementary concepts that support student success. Kundu defines “agency” as an action that “gives humans greater influence over their own fates and external determinants, though different situations leave different amounts of space for exercising one’s free will” (p. 34). Kundu’s narrative is centered on the inherent need to see students differently to cultivate their success. By moving beyond the deficit perspective, Kundu suggests that we can recognize the agency and power in all human beings. Spanning less than 200 pages, Kundu uses *The Power of Student Agency* to challenge readers to examine their own assumptions about student success, especially in the face of structural and societal barriers. He also charges educators with the task of dismantling ideologies that suggest merit and hard work will lead to success.

No matter how much “grit” a student might have, it does not guarantee success, as there isn’t an achievement gap, but an “opportunity gap” (p. 6). Building on the work of scholars like Rich Milner, Kundu argues that these gaps are prevalent at all educational levels, and perpetuate and maintain society’s existing power relations. While enhancing what we know about grit, Kundu introduces and expands agency through the voice of his research participants, using rich data to illuminate how agency was necessary for their social and academic growth. Kundu offers Liz as an example of the importance of a functional relationship between grit and agency. Liz’s grit, he argues, pushed her to continue pursuing her degree at her rigorous institution even after taking a leave of absence due to burnout and failure to complete assignments on time. Liz’s use of grit to persevere is highlighted with her declaration that “I had to get this degree from this college,” but it works in tandem with her burgeoning agency when she reflects, “I spent time thinking about what I wanted to do. Because what was the point, if I was just going to come here and let the same thing happen again” (p. 105).

In the first chapter, Kundu describes some of the popular perspectives on student success and achievement in the United States. This chapter is used to introduce grit, a concept he argues is helpful in helping drive student success, but by itself overlooks the social and cultural aspects of success. Here, one can critique Kundu’s acknowledgement of grit’s conceptual flaws without naming the oppressive, racist, and sexist power structures that limit the use of agency and grit and ultimately trap poor, marginalized students in cycles of poverty. In Chapter 2, he fleshes out his conceptualization of agency and helps the reader understand how it functions in relation to grit. Here, Kundu sets his conceptualization of agency apart from “grit” discourse. A focus on agency centers power as part of our discourse, allowing us to examine the systems we work within (and against). In this way, we learn to leverage our power in our spheres of influence/loci of control while also critiquing the systems of power that demand agency to navigate. Grit, by contrast, may function to obscure systems of power rather than the transformational and disruptive potential of agency to navigate systemic barriers while also critiquing them.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 include the “meat” of Kundu’s research findings. Each chapter focuses on a specific category that he contends aids the development of agency. For example, Chapter 3 on “Home and Family”

focuses on the impact of family and supports in driving agentic development. This chapter begins with perhaps some of the most richly crafted antidotes to deficit thinking. Here, Kundu describes “strong-willed parents” who instill and communicate ideas to their children about the value of education. The quotes he presents from parents push back on dominant narratives about low-income communities and communities of color who “don’t care about education.” These narratives, in our experience, are pervasive in educational contexts and espoused by educational stakeholders across the U.S. Later in this same chapter, he presents portraits from students who describe how familial support outside of a two-parent household was integral to their development of agency. Social and school settings situate agentic development through tailored support systems which help individuals shape goals and perform with purpose and passion. Kundu notes that passion is the goal, but it is an elusive one that requires the proper ecosystems to encourage its pursuit and validate individuals. Kundu concludes his argument in Chapter 6 by providing scenarios to apply his findings to the real world, touching on the importance of consistent role models, as “when students can relate to their mentors on a personal level, they can visualize how success could look in their own lives” (p. 114).

The Power of Student Agency is a rousing example of qualitative research presented to interdisciplinary audiences. From his deft explanations of his own positionality to the layout of each chapter, the book is accessible and engaging, with Kundu even suggesting that the reader “choose your own experience” (p. 8) when deciding where to start reading.

Kundu’s spirited writing encourages practitioners at all levels to move toward a strength-based model that affirms students and their capacity, and he challenges readers to examine their own beliefs about student success and demystify individualist ideologies that suggest success if one simply tries hard enough. In the K-12 education sphere, *The Power of Student Agency* provides educators a resource to better understand how to meet the needs of all students while affording policymakers and community leaders a framework to better support lifelong learning and “positive social change that sustains and lifts up our community” (p. 121). It supports discourse beyond the “grit” narrative, which can create traps that overlook the social aspects of success beyond simple drive and determination, as “some roses grow from concrete and others flourish in lush flower beds” (p. 8).

We see this book as especially useful in conversation with educational scholarship about systems of power that govern P-16 contexts where students and practitioners are situated and must navigate (i.e., Taylor, 2021) and theorizing about youth success and resistance amidst power structures (i.e., Tuck & Yang, 2014). Recent scholarship has focused on, for example, Black women students and agency (i.e., Commodore et al., 2018) in higher education, and Latinx students working to identify institutional agents for support in navigating powered educational contexts (i.e., Bensimon et al., 2019). In addition to the ways in which students might harness agency, readers might consider educational scholarship about the role of practitioners and administrators in cultivating environments that support and empower students.

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