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Book Review

***The Power of Student Agency: Looking Beyond Grit to Close the Opportunity Gap* by Anindya Kundu**

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Student success is increasingly understood by educators and researchers as being influenced by both internal and external factors during a student's academic progression. The stakes of ensuring all students thrive—regardless of their background or circumstances—has never been higher as we see continue to face educational, economic, and social disruptions. *The Power of Student Agency: Looking Beyond Grit to Close the Opportunity Gap* by Anindya Kundu provides insight on supporting student success through student voices reflecting on their ability to navigate barriers in their individual educational journeys.

*The Power of Student Agency* is an intersection of academic research, practitioner guidance, and inspirational stories that are centered around the research question: “How do students who are initially socially and economically disadvantaged explain what it takes to overcome significant obstacles and succeed?” (Kundu, 2020, p. 20). The book is an encapsulation of Kundu's research project examining successful students of color from low-income backgrounds through a lens of agency. He 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). Using a qualitative approach, the book categorizes the lived experiences of 50 students from New York City into the following support structures that build and promote agency: home and family, school settings, networks providing social capital, mentorship, and faith.

Kundu's work is responding to the concept of “grit” recently surging in popularity in educational programming, in part due to Angela Duckworth's research and popular TED Talk on the subject (Duckworth, 2013). While acknowledging the theory of grit assists in identifying behaviors that allow people to maintain “passion and perseverance for long term goals” (Duckworth, 2016, p. 269), Kundu identifies a gap in academic literature of examining the structural barriers that could limit or prohibit student success even if a learner possesses grit. Kundu asserts that possessing grit alone will not remove obstacles for learners, but rather that agency and grit are complementary and intertwined concepts that support student success. Through the course of the book, he challenges readers to examine their own assumptions about how students succeed given the structural and societal barriers that exist, while also calling on educators to avoid the ideologies of meritocracy and individualism that perpetuate false narratives that all students can succeed if only they try hard enough. He also consistently

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reinforces his assertion that rather there being an “achievement gap,” there is an “opportunity gap” for students at all educational levels (Kundu, 2020, p. 6).

Kundu’s book expands the grit narrative and introduces examples of agency in his research participant’s lived experiences, often directly quoting students about their academic and social journeys as scholars. Kundu grounds his research through a strength-based approach, rather than a deficiency lens, while encouraging other education researchers to follow similar asset-based approaches that reflect student-affirming language. The book includes examples of how to assist students with building agency, including student self-reflection guides and academic coaching prompts. The text also includes diagrams and concept models on agency-related topics, such as social capital to aid in practitioner and student understanding of agency theory.

Though not the population focus of the book, Kundu’s research has implications for institutions and educators supporting online and non-traditional students. Evidence-based guides on developing “self-help behaviors” can be implemented in online education programs, as online students are often geographically or physically removed from support structures that exist on campus. The agency-building reflection prompts would lend themselves easily to online discussion boards or blogs, while the research presented on mental health practices to support agency could greatly support adult online learners juggling competing priorities and responsibilities.

Kundu’s book is an energizing example of presenting qualitative academic research work to broad audiences in a digestible format. His strength of explaining his research methods, research purposes, and his own research positionality makes the work accessible for educational practitioners, education scholars, parents, and anyone with a stake in the education of our society. The chapters are presented similarly to a journal article, with Kundu explaining the purpose and underpinnings of each chapter while encouraging readers to navigate or skip around to chapters most appealing to them, something he notes as a “choose your own experience” (Kundu, 2020, p. 8). Kundu’s book is a timely addition to educational literature aimed to help students and those who support them to acknowledge the social economic disadvantages that exist, while providing guidance—but most importantly hope—that barriers can be overcome through deliberate learner actions and intentional support systems.

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References

Duckworth, A. E. (2013, April). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance* [Video]. TED Conferences.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance)

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