



***Transforming Educational Leadership: Non-Traditional
Narratives to Promote Equity in Uncertain Times***
Anindya Kundu

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Abstract

*This review examines Anindya Kundu's *Transforming Educational Leadership: Non-traditional Narratives to Promote Equity in Uncertain Times* (Oxford University Press, 2025), which draws on interviews with twenty-two educational leaders to theorize equity-oriented leadership amid book bans, curriculum restrictions, and systemic disinvestment. The book is reviewed from the standpoint of a first-generation Black international doctoral student researching self-efficacy among underrepresented graduate students; the review identifies the book's principal contributions, its grounding of collective efficacy in lived experience, its repositioning of "hand-ups" over deficit-based interventions, and its integration of theory with practitioner narratives, while raising concerns about the under-theorization of the "non-traditional narratives" framework, its limited cross-cultural reach, and its tendency to foreground triumph over the structural costs equity-oriented leaders frequently bear. The review situates Kundu's contribution within transformative and applied critical leadership scholarship.*

Keywords: *educational leadership, equity, collective efficacy, transformative leadership, student agency, non-traditional narratives, critical leadership*

As a first-generation Black international doctoral student from Ghana conducting research on self-efficacy and persistence among Black international graduate students, I approach educational leadership scholarship from a distinctive vantage point. My journey through multiple U.S. institutions—from serving as a multicultural programming coordinator at Canisius University to residential life roles at Brown, Syracuse, and Marshall Universities—has shown me firsthand how leadership shapes the experiences of students navigating intersecting identities of race, nationality, and academic status. When my mentor, Dr. Amy Li, recommended that I write a book review for my

1. The author of this review and the book author are both affiliated with Florida International University but have no prior professional or personal relationship. This review was undertaken at the suggestion of the reviewer's doctoral advisor, Dr. Amy Li, as the reviewer's first publication effort. The reviewer's doctoral research on self-efficacy among Black international graduate students aligns with the book's themes of agency and leadership.

first publication, I was drawn to Anindya Kundu's *Transforming Educational Leadership: Non-traditional Narratives to Promote Equity in Uncertain Times* precisely because it speaks to questions at the heart of my research: How do leaders create conditions for agency? What role does collective efficacy play in student success? And whose stories count when we theorize about educational leadership?

At a moment when public education in the United States faces unprecedented challenges—from book bans and curriculum restrictions to teacher shortages and systematic disinvestment—Kundu's work arrives as both a timely intervention and a call to action. Building on his PROSE Award-nominated book *The Power of Student Agency* (2020), Kundu shifts his analytical lens from students to the leaders who shape educational ecosystems. The book's central thesis is deceptively simple yet profoundly important: effective educational leadership in our current moment requires "non-traditional narratives"—approaches that challenge meritocratic assumptions, center human dignity, and recognize that systemic change demands both individual agency and collective action.

Through interviews with twenty-two educational leaders—ranging from former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to Miami-based literacy advocate Debra Bazile—Kundu constructs a montage of leadership philosophies across six thematic chapters. Following a theoretical foundation drawing on social and cultural capital, collective efficacy, and the structure-agency dichotomy, subsequent chapters explore how leaders apply research to address injustices, leverage networks, provide "hand-ups over handouts," and center human dignity. This structure positions the book as both a theoretical contribution and a practical guide, distinguishing it from traditional leadership texts that often prioritize one or the other.

One of the book's most significant strengths is its methodological approach. Rather than offering abstract prescriptions, Kundu grounds his arguments in lived experiences of diverse leaders. The storytellers include researchers like Amanda Lewis, whose ethnographic work on race in schools has shaped a generation of scholarship, and practitioners like James Whitfield, a Black principal in Texas who faced backlash for his equity-focused leadership. Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of Jacqueline Rodero, an FIU student who emerged from the foster care system to become a peer mentor—exemplifying how individuals who have navigated systemic barriers often become the most effective advocates for change. This methodological choice aligns Kundu's work with the narrative turn in leadership studies (Ospina & Foldy, 2009) while offering something those more traditionally academic texts lack: the visceral weight of lived experience.

Kundu's treatment of collective efficacy resonates strongly with my research on self-efficacy and achievement among underrepresented students. His argument that "the power of collective efficacy among educators is more significantly predictive of student achievement than socioeconomic status" (p. 67) aligns with Bandura's (1997) foundational work while extending it into educational leadership. This theoretical move is significant because it suggests that building shared beliefs among educational stakeholders may be more consequential than addressing resource disparities alone—though Kundu is careful not to discount the latter. The distinction between "handouts" and "hand-ups," illustrated through Chicago CRED's work with individuals overcoming gang violence and addiction, demonstrates how holistic, community-embedded support can transform trajectories in ways that traditional deficit-oriented interventions cannot.

Nevertheless, the book has notable limitations. Most significantly, Kundu's "non-traditional narratives" framework, while compelling, remains under-theorized. What criteria distinguish "non-traditional" from "traditional" leadership narratives? The text suggests that non-traditional approaches challenge meritocracy and center dignity, but this capacious definition risks encompassing any equity-oriented practice without offering analytical precision. For instance, both

Arne Duncan's policy-level initiatives and Rodero's peer mentorship are presented as "non-traditional," yet these operate at fundamentally different scales and through different mechanisms. A more systematic taxonomy—perhaps distinguishing between positional and emergent leadership, or between institutional reform and community-based resistance—would strengthen the framework's utility for researchers seeking to build on Kundu's work.

From my perspective as an international scholar who has navigated educational systems in both West Africa and the United States, I find myself questioning the extent to which Kundu's framework travels across cultural contexts. The book is deeply situated within American educational politics, which is both a strength—given the specificity of challenges like Florida's restrictions on African American history—and a limitation. Berry and colleagues' (2006) acculturation framework suggests that concepts like "agency" and "capital" function differently for individuals whose reference points span multiple cultural systems. In many African educational contexts, the "communal agency" Kundu touches upon operates within kinship networks and collective responsibility structures that may not map neatly onto American notions of individual-plus-collective agency. While Kundu acknowledges that "community-based bonds are key to developing authentic social welfare" (p. 152), a more sustained engagement with how these dynamics function cross-culturally would position the book more effectively within global educational leadership scholarship.

Additionally, the book's narrative of resilience, while inspiring, risks romanticizing individual fortitude without fully grappling with structural constraints that cannot be overcome by agency and coalition alone. How does the book handle leaders who "fail" or are pushed out? Diane Ravitch's story—in which she sacrificed professional networks to challenge policies she once endorsed—gestures toward these costs, but most narratives conclude in triumph rather than examining the emotional labor, career derailment, or institutional retaliation that equity-oriented leaders frequently face. A more systematic treatment of these costs would offer a fuller picture of what transformative leadership demands and might better prepare readers for the realities of this work. As Santamaría and Santamaría (2016) argue, applied critical leadership requires acknowledging both possibilities and perils.

Despite these limitations, *Transforming Educational Leadership* makes a meaningful contribution that distinguishes it from existing texts in the field. Unlike Shields' (2010) work on transformative leadership, which remains primarily theoretical, or Goleman and colleagues' (2002) competency-focused approach, Kundu centers narrative and positionality in ways that honor practitioner knowledge. The book will be valuable for graduate students in educational leadership and higher education administration programs seeking case studies for reflective analysis, practicing administrators looking for frameworks to articulate their equity-oriented work, and researchers interested in narrative methodologies. Instructors might pair specific chapters with theoretical readings—Chapter 5 alongside Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, for instance—to prompt students' comparative analysis of how different scholars conceptualize assets in marginalized communities.

In the book's conclusion, Kundu poses a question that lingers: "Who will serve these students?" (p. 179). At a time marked by what Kundu describes as "intense and uncivilized cultural wars" over education (p. 55), this book offers not prescriptions but possibilities—concrete examples of leaders who have found ways to center equity amid institutional constraints. For those of us committed to this work, whether as emerging scholars, practicing administrators, or students navigating these systems ourselves, Kundu's narratives provide both inspiration and a reminder

that transformative leadership, while difficult, remains possible. The book reminds us that educational leadership is fundamentally about people—their stories, their struggles, and their capacity for transformation.

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