

Agency



A thoughtful reading guide adapted
for high-school students, college students,
and educators alike

STUDY GUIDE

Ian Rowe

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Agency is the force of one's free will guided by moral discernment.



Dear Educator,

I am thrilled that you have chosen to engage with my book, *Agency: The Four Point Plan (F.R.E.E.) for All Children to Overcome the Victimhood Narrative and Discover Their Pathway to Power*, and share it with your students. As an educator and lifelong student myself, I know that teaching is not just an act of service for others. At its best, it is also an act of learning, self-challenge, and growth.

Before I introduce *Agency* in brief and send you off on your journey of guided study, allow me to wish you the utmost success in both reaching your students and peers and reflecting on and grappling with my book. There will surely be some parts of *Agency* with which you already agree and others that will draw your critiques. But I am confident in this: You and your students will benefit from your good-faith engagement with the book.

Now, a bit about *Agency*. I wrote it because I found the conversation around education and opportunity, particularly for minorities and kids from low-income families, sorely lacking. On one side are the many Americans who believe that failure to achieve social and economic mobility is an individual's fault. That's not right. On the other, many prominent voices in our society insist that "the system" is keeping certain kids down. That's not right either.

There is another way to analyze our shortcomings and provide warranted optimism to Americans of all creeds and colors. It's the way that insists that despite any disadvantages they may have, all our kids can succeed and flourish if they make the right choices. In *Agency*, you'll see why I believe that ambition guided by moral direction is the most important thing we can instill in our nation's children. You'll also see how we can put this into practice by teaching young Americans about the four elements shown again and again in the social-science literature to be most important to flourishing: family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship, or as I like to call it, FREE.

As the founder of public charter schools that have served thousands of students and will boost many thousands more, I have tried to put these values front and center in everything we do. I believe that is the most important thing we can do to help young people unleash their potential and live secure and fulfilling lives. But instilling in our children a sense of agency, with an appreciation for the gravity of their choices, is easier said than done. Putting it into action requires tireless, dedicated, passionate educators—like you. As you will see throughout the book, I have experienced and appreciated the power of great role models, and as an administrator and educational entrepreneur, I stake my reputation on teachers' dedication to the cause every single day.

I hope your close reading of *Agency* will instill in you and your students newfound enthusiasm for their potential to grow and achieve. With an appreciation for the importance of family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship, I hope your students will be inspired to take control of their lives, become captains of their fate, and start working toward their highest aspirations.

Enjoy and engage,

Ian Rowe

Study Guide

PART I EXERCISES

1. One parent in Evanston, Illinois, a school district that has embraced antiracist education, reports that her son began despairing about “systems put in place that prevent black people from accomplishing anything” (66).

If you were looking to instill a sense of agency in that child, how would you respond?

2. Rowe is critical of KIPP’s decision to change its slogan from “Work Hard. Be Nice.”

If you were marketing a school that cared about advancing agency, what would its slogan be?

3. Match the expression [blame the system, blame the victim, or agency] to the worldview.

a. **Black people may face disadvantages white people do not, but they, too, can succeed by remaining ambitious and making good choices.**

Answer: Agency. This expression combines a sense of being “captain of one’s own life” with moral direction.

b. **Black people can’t get ahead because America is racist to the core.**

Answer: Blame the system. This expression points to a problem with the country as an explanation for why black people struggle. It blames systemic racism and overlooks the role of individual choices.

c. **Black people can’t get ahead because they don’t work hard enough.**

Answer: Blame the victim. This expression points to a problem with a group of people as an explanation for their own struggles. It does not account for social factors beyond an individual’s control that may hinder social mobility.

4. True or False

a. **Instilling a sense of agency means denying that minority kids face unique challenges in America.**

Answer: False. Instilling agency is not a process blind to the unique challenges children face. Rather, it allows children to see that, even despite their circumstances, they have sovereignty over their personal choices that can contribute to their own uplift.

b. **Equity is just a more thoughtful way of providing the traditional American aspiration of equality.**

Answer: False. Equity is a distinct concept that looks for equality of result between individuals and groups. The traditional American ideal of equality does not require equality of outcome and does not consider inequality of outcome to be evidence of inequality generally.

c. **Agency combines the sense that one’s choices are real and matter with the framework for making good choices.**

Answer: True. This is the “free will plus moral direction” formula rephrased. Agency means that you have the power to choose and that you are capable of choosing wisely.

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PART II EXERCISES

1. You are writing a brief speech for the president of the United States, to be delivered at a Boys & Girls Club in Washington, DC, on changing our culture to encourage social and economic mobility among low-income and minority children. **List a few points you want to be sure to make central to your public information campaign.** Think also about how you want to frame the relative importance of structural or systemic barriers and the power of young people’s choices.

Points

2. Imagine you are an administrator in a school that aims primarily to instill a sense of agency in its students. After a classroom lesson on the importance of marriage and two-parent homes, a fourth-grade student who you know is being raised by a single parent comes to you on the verge of tears because he does not want to feel inferior or incapable of making something great of his life. **What do you tell him to restore his sense of agency and self-worth?**

3. Circle the statements that, if spoken by a teacher, parent, or other authority figure to a child, could effectively advance the child’s sense of agency.

a. **“Your decisions matter. Your choices, big and small, matter.”**

Answer: This does advance agency by expressing a significant prong of agency generally. It expresses in simple terms that people are captains of their life without saying that one’s choices are *guarantees* of any one outcome or that circumstances do not matter.

b. **“You can achieve anything you want in life, so don’t let anyone else tell you what you should or should not do.”**

Answer: This is a tricky one. Though it does advance a sense of will, it fails the moral direction prong that separates agency from pure ambition. Agency requires guidance, which does include listening to people who tell you that some choices are better than others.

c. **“Life is hard. It is full of struggle and pain. Some people can get through it, but others simply do not.”**

Answer: If you circled this one, you might be picking up on the fact that the statement is almost certainly true, as advocates of agency will admit. But it is incomplete. It leaves the possibility of transcending struggle and pain to chance, or an unspoken and innate ability to “get through it.” Without elaboration about what a child can do to transcend his or her circumstances, it sounds as though doing so is a matter of pure luck, or external forces, so this is not an agency-advancing statement.

d. **“Getting married before you have children will be crucial to achieving your goals in life.”**

Answer: This is a perfect example of the moral guidance that directs a child’s will toward achieving his or her goals. Though it is not a comprehensive expression of agency, it advances a central component—marriage—specifically and implies that a young person’s choices matter generally.

PART II EXERCISES

- e. **“Focusing on fatherhood as important to making it in life is racist.”**

Answer: This is the opposite of building agency. Instead of encouraging a young person to make responsible decisions—and see in family formation an opportunity to take a step toward “making it”—this blames “the system” for imposing racialized behaviors as a condition of success.

- f. **“It’s OK to aspire to be a professional athlete, but don’t be fooled into thinking your favorite athlete is a good model for your success. He does have lots of money, fame, and children out of wedlock, but that is not a recipe for success for most people.”**

Answer: This statement may seem like a dream crusher, but it is an important point nonetheless. Most children will suffer a significant disadvantage being born to unmarried parents. Breaking that cycle will require young people knowing that it is not equally good to have children within and outside of marriage. That is part of the moral direction that is central to agency.

- g. **“It’s not fair that in this country you have to follow certain behaviors to stay out of poverty. You should be able to live your life how you want.”**

Answer: This is not an agency-advancing statement because it suggests that the system is what needs to change for life to be “fair.” Rather than encouraging young people to make the good choices embodied in the success sequence, it encourages them to direct their energy toward fixing an “unfairness” they cannot change.

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The FREE Framework to Build Agency

EDUCATOR

1. Rowe describes his parents' courtship and travels as an "adventure" (158).

What can your students gain by thinking of their lives—and especially their trials and tribulations—as an adventure?

How can you help them see that challenges and obstacles are opportunities for not just growth but adventure?

Notes

2. Try to capture your initial impression of Rowe's FREE framework, laid out in brief on pages 160–62.

Would you add any other building blocks of agency?

Are you suspicious of any of these four? If so, why?

3. One building block that might cause you some suspicion is religion (161). Rowe points to two elements of religion that make it crucial to agency: religion's unique moral authority and its ability to shape social norms.

Why might religion provide something that a deeply held but not religious moral code cannot?

4. Rowe quotes Viktor Frankl: "Between stimulus and response there is space. . . . In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom" (163). Frankl was a psychiatrist, therapist, and Holocaust survivor.

How do you think Frankl's experiences and training led him to think about agency?

How do you and your students experience the "space" between stimulus and response?

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Part III Exercises

1. Circle the statements that accurately express or advance the FREE framework for empowering young people to fulfill their potential.

a. Young people are responsible for cultivating personal agency on their own.

Answer: If you circled this, you might be making the common mistake of thinking that because young people will ultimately be responsible for making good choices, they are similarly responsible for developing the knowledge and habits that will allow them to do so. However, it is mediating institutions such as the family, church, and school that cultivate personal agency. Agency is individually practiced but socially empowered, and the FREE framework aims to advance that social empowerment.

b. The “family” prong of FREE means you need to be born into a two-parent family to succeed.

Answer: This is not quite right. Children not born into two-parent families can succeed despite the odds, and the “F” in FREE is less concerned with the family you inherited than the one you will build. What is really important is that all children know that the family they will form in the future should be one with two present, married parents if they want to give their own future children the best chance to succeed.

c. Religion is important principally because it speaks with moral authority and can shape social norms like little else.

Answer: This accurately represents the role of religion in FREE. Religion has the power to guide behavior in ways that turn ambition into agency. It does so with moral authority that cannot be replicated by immanent (not transcendent) authorities, even the government.

d. The “education” prong of FREE means rejecting “equity” goals that encourage equality of outcomes at the expense of excellence.

Answer: Yes, the first “E” of FREE requires young people to engage in self-discipline and hard work that will lead to educational excellence, including obtaining knowledge, skills, and virtues that not everyone may obtain in equal measure. It also involves advocating for policies that provide more and better opportunities for all.

e. An entrepreneurial mindset means teaching students that it is ideal for them to start businesses.

Answer: This is not quite right, though teaching the mindset it takes to start a business is much closer. Entrepreneurship does not mean teaching students that their life is best spent pursuing a career in business. It does mean encouraging students to approach their lives as people who own their own futures. If you are having trouble distinguishing the concepts, consider revisiting the chapter on entrepreneurship.

f. Government policy does not matter in the FREE approach to agency because the FREE approach is all about individuals making choices.

Answer: If you circled this, we did not read this section the same way. The FREE approach involves plenty of policy advocacy, including school choice for all and family-friendly policies that incentivize work without penalizing marriage. To socially empower good choices, government policy must encourage—or at least not discourage—the kinds of behaviors that are central to agency.

g. In fulfilling the religion part of the FREE framework, any set of beliefs based in faith and spirituality will do.

Answer: This is not quite right. As Rowe writes, “a new form of identity politics has risen to fill [the] spiritual vacuum” (179) left by traditional religion: antiracism. But such beliefs do not encourage agency and thus do not help black communities. What does seem to keep people out of poverty is attending traditional religious services, likely because of their communal elements and strong moral instruction that directs individuals to act righteously.