

The Brightest Part of the Forest: A Grit Analysis of an Ontario Children's Book Award

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Abstract

This study explores how grit manifests in the nominees of Ontario's Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award children's literature competition from 2013-2018. Performing a document analysis (Bowen, 2009), we used a modified version of Duckworth's (2018) grit scale to gauge the grittiness of the nominees' protagonists. We found that 28 of the 60 titles portrayed grit with 19 of those titles scoring four or higher on the modified grit scale indicating that protagonists had consistently high scores for the various aspects of grit. Our paper concludes with a discussion about implications to educators seeking to use these books to engage students in discussions about grit and resilience.

Introduction

The Ontario Library Association's (OLA's) Forest of Reading is a recreational reading program and book competition that pulses with energy and succeeds in its primary goal of generating enthusiasm for reading. Engagement from young readers is particularly high: according to the Forest of Reading's information kit, "more than 250,000 readers participate every year individually, or at their school or public library" (OLA, 2018). The Forest of Reading offers eight reading programs to encourage reading at all ages. These programs are widely integrated into school curricula since many schools across Ontario take an active role in the voting process and teachers are encouraged to integrate nominees and award-winning titles into their classroom libraries. Although the fiction and nonfiction winners in the Forest of Reading award are reader-selected, the initial nominations are compiled by teachers, librarians, and library employees. The criteria for fiction nomination include: literary quality, audience appeal, accuracy, relevance, and possible curricular connections. Additionally, nominators are tasked with balancing the final list for considerations such as "gender identity of protagonists, gender and cultural diversity of subject appeal, geographical settings, e.g., rural, urban, cross-Canada locations, and genre variety" (OLA, 2018). Authors or illustrators must be Canadian and titles are often, but not only, published by Canadian presses.

Award-winning children's literature plays a significant role in curriculum development and implementation (Giorgis, 2013), and the Forest of Reading is no exception. Because of the widespread presence of these titles in classrooms across Ontario, it is necessary to examine their themes and content. This study explores the ways grit manifests in the nominees and winners of Ontario's Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award children's literature competition from 2013-2018. The Blue Spruce Award subsection of the Forest of Reading competition focuses on illustrated children's literature and targets kindergarten to grade two (K-2) readers. This study is framed

around the question: How does grit manifest in the protagonists of the 2013-2018 Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award nominees?

Theoretical Framework

We approach this analysis through the linked concepts of grit and resilience as our theoretical framework. Duckworth (2016) establishes four primary components of grit: interest, practice, purpose, and hope. Grit and resilience are closely related in this paradigm, existing as near synonyms. According to her research, grit is a major determinant to personal and professional success. More importantly, Duckworth believes that grit is not necessarily innate, but can be developed over time. In our conceptualization, based on Duckworth's findings, we use the terms grit and resilience interchangeably to mean the ability to persevere in the face of difficulties and bounce back from challenges. But why frame our analysis of titles in the Forest of Reading around grit and resilience?

Grit and the Classroom

In Ontario public schools, grit and resilience intertwine significantly with province-wide mandates to improve student mental health and well-being as outlined in *Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-being* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Moreover, the Ontario Ministry of Education also highlights the importance of grit and resilience for student mental health within Ontario curriculum documents. For example, the first goal outlined in the Ontario kindergarten to grade eight physical education curriculum is for students to develop the living skills needed to cultivate resilience through a variety of learning opportunities including practicing communication, building relationships, positive interactions with others, and critical and creative thinking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). Grit is also emphasized in the Ontario kindergarten curriculum as resilience is framed as an important objective of the core pillars that organize the kindergarten program including problem-solving, self-regulation, and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

A common understanding of the components of resilience emphasizes that “a foundation of self-awareness can assist youth to build aspects of resilience including improved coping and social skills, problem solving skills, and feelings of self-esteem” (Coholic, p. 314, 2011). Although grit has been shown to be a factor in teacher retention (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014) and student success (Goodwin & Miller, 2013), the recent fascination with grit in formal education has also been criticized for cultivating a narrative that frames success and failure as a matter of individual responsibility without recognizing the impact institutional and societal inequities have on minoritized students (Golden, 2017). For example, in her criticism of “culture of poverty” discourses in urban schooling, Ladson-Billings (2017) points out that emphasizing grit for students that do not have the same supports as their well-off peers asks “the most disadvantaged to once again do more with less and, even more importantly, to blame them if they do not succeed” (p. 82). Because of these valid critiques of the grit narrative, it is important to consider the ways in which K-2 students are exposed to grittiness given the curricular directives to integrate grit, resilience, and growth mindset into schools in recent years. Developing a deeper and more critical perspective on grit and resilience can help educators and students better understand both the benefits and limitations of grit in learning.

Various educational initiatives have emerged in correspondence to the emphasis on mental health, well-being, grit, and resilience in Ontario. Amongst these initiatives include schoolwide mindfulness activities, workshops, parent out-reach, and pilot programs targeting specifically at helping students develop their grittiness and resilience (Toronto District School Board 2015, 2016). Additionally, in a magazine distributed widely to all its members, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) (2013) published an article outlining the impact of resilience on academic success and emotional well-being focusing specifically on strategies elementary school teachers can use to help teach students about grit and resilience. One of their suggestions is to facilitate conversations about resilience with students through literature. Specifically, ETFO recommends a book entitled *Tough Times* by Barbara Shook Hazen. *Tough Times* is a strong literary piece that can be used to engage students in discussions about grit and resilience because it grapples with topics such as family financial struggles, problem-solving, and critical thinking. However, it is a potentially challenging resource to integrate into the classroom since it was published in 1983 and therefore may be a difficult resource for teachers to locate and may come across as antiquated to children in a contemporary classroom. For this reason, there is great need critically examine the contemporary children's literature texts that are widely available to elementary school teachers with a focus on the presence of grit and resilience in these narratives—narratives such as the nominees in the Forest of Reading Ontario book competition.

Award-Winning Picture Books

Although research on the Forest of Reading has, thus far, been limited to a recent study on reader motivation (Maliszewski & Soleas, 2018), there is a body of literature exploring award winning picture books, particularly Caldecott winners and nominees, from a variety of lenses. The Caldecott, given annually since 1938, is an award that recognizes “the artist of the most distinguished American picture book for children” (American Library Association, 2019). Crisp and Hiller's (2011) work on the Caldecott winners from 1938 to 2011 focused on portrayals of gender in these titles, and they found that problematic portrayals of gender spans the picture books, including recent titles, rather than being a problem that is confined to the more out-of-date works, raising the very real concern “that these representations may have the power to lower self-esteem and increase feelings of "invisibility" for readers of *all* genders who don't fit the binary, culturally sanctioned performances of "male masculinity" and "female femininity" privileged” (p. 27) in these texts. Another study spanning both winners and honor books from 1938 to 2005 (Dyches, Prater, & Jenson, 2006), found that across all titles considered, there were only 11 characters with a disability, and that these portrayals included unrealistic and uncommon examples of disability, such as the temporary blindness suffered by the prince in *Rapunzel*. Out of the 11 titles the researchers analyzed, seven were based on folktales, further distancing the books' portrayals of characters with disability from any reality that students might encounter.

In contrast to these two studies which found the Caldecott books to be problematic in terms of portrayal of gender and disability, an analysis of a portion of the same award winners from 1975 to 1993 (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1997) found that the books' portrayal of elderly characters was mostly positive, with “the illustrators of the award-winning picture books were sensitive to portraying the majority (70% or more) of both older women and men throughout the 23-year period as healthy, clean,

friendly, happy, good, caring and not lonely” (p. 98). Although children’s award winners may be problematic in issues of representation, the presence of these titles in classrooms and libraries makes further exploration imperative. Despite the literature available on various award-winning titles, we found no studies that examined award winning picture books with an emphasis on grit and resilience.

An important strategy for teaching children how to develop their grit and resilience is to explicitly teach them about skills such as problem-solving, perseverance, and self-regulation while also modelling grit and resilience for them (Bashant, 2014). In schools, modelling grit and resilience usually takes the form of teachers and other school staff and leaders embodying these traits and having explicit conversations with students about their decisions and thought processes. However, it is important to note that books are another avenue through which we can offer children opportunities to observe modelled grit and resilience. For example, in a case study conducted by Stewart and Ames (2014), researchers explored the use of culturally affirming and thematically appropriate bibliotherapy with elementary school-aged African American children traumatized by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Stewart and Ames found that participants learned how to rebuild their self-awareness and self-esteem by identifying with the strong and resilient characters in children’s books such as *MaDear* by Denise Lewis Patrick and *Drita, My Home Girl* by Jenny Lombard. Therefore, the presence of grit in the Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award nominees may engage K-2 students in thinking beyond their known parameters, particularly if these characteristics are emphasized by adult readers with pre-literate students. In order to better conceptualize the ways in which the books in the Forest of Reading might offer readers a range of examples of grit beyond their lived experiences, this article focuses on our guiding research question: how does grit manifest in the protagonists of the 2013-2018 Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award nominees?

Methods

We focused on analyzing the Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award nominees and winners from 2013-2018. We selected this date range as a means of limiting the study to most current discourse on grit in education. Specific criteria for Blue Spruce nominees include: readability, literary merit, learning value, and quality of illustrations (OLA, 2018).

The methodology for this study was document analysis. In line with the data analysis procedures of document analysis, data was analyzed through both content and thematic analysis (Bowen 2009; Leavy, 2007). Content analysis entails a first-pass review in which documents are organized into two groups: 1) documents containing relevant information and 2) documents not containing relevant information (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the purposes of this study, we used Duckworth’s (2016) description of grit (resilience, passion in a project, and persistence) to guide our content analysis. During our content analysis, we did separate initial readings of the 2013-2018 Blue Spruce Award nominated books and sorted them into three categories: yes (shows evidence of grit), no (does not show evidence of grit), and maybe. Books in the “yes” group (28 of 60 titles) went on to the second phase of analysis: thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis involves re-reading documents deemed as having relevant information looking specifically for pattern recognition with emergent themes becoming categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To guide our more thorough reading of the qualifying Blue Spruce Award nominees, we used Duckworth’s

(2018) grit scale for children. Duckworth’s grit scale is a five-point Likert scale with self-assessment questions that align with the characteristics of grit as outlined by Duckworth. With permission from Duckworth, we modified Duckworth’s grit scale for children to better align it with the purposes of this research project by swapping “I” to “the main character” in each question. We read all relevant Blue Spruce Award nominees separately, completing a modified grit scale for each book. We then did a cross-check for inter-rater reliability to confirm our evaluations and reach 100% consensus. The following are sample items from our modified grit scale for children: new ideas and projects sometimes distract the main character from previous ones, the main character has been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest, the main character is a hard worker. Additionally, we considered the literary themes that emerged in these texts through subsequent close readings of the 28 titles included in this study. Those themes emerged inductively through close reading and dialogue between both authors, primarily through in-person reading and discussion sessions where we read, discussed, and revisited the titles.

Results and Conclusions

Out of a possible grit score ranging from 1 to 5, 19 of the 28 surveyed books scored a 4 or higher. The lowest score in this analysis was a 2.75 and one book earned a perfect score of 5, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Grit Scores for Blue Spruce Titles 2013-2018 Using the Modified Grit Scale

Nomination Year	Title of Book	Author/Illustrator	Grit Score
2018	Shark Lady	Jess Keating & Marta Álvarez Miguéns	5
2016	Stop, Thief!	Heather Tekavec & Pierre Pratt	4.75
2016	Butterfly Park	Elly MacKay	4.75
2016	Henry Holton Takes the Ice	Sandra Bradley & Sara Palacios	4.625
2015	The Most Magnificent Thing	Ashley Spires	4.625
2013	Splinters	Kevin Sylvester	4.625
2013	Really and Truly	Émilie Rivard & Anne-Claire Delisle	4.625
2018	A Squiggly Story	Andrew Larsen & Mike Lowery	4.5
2016	Super Red Riding Hood	Claudia Dávila	4.5
2014	Sky Color	Peter H. Reynolds	4.5
2014	If You Hold A Seed	Elly MacKay	4.5
2018	The Owl and the Lemming	Roselynn Akulukjuk & Amanda Sandland	4.375
2018	The Branch	Mireille Messier & Pierre Pratt	4.375

2015	The Highest Number in The World	Roy Macgregor & Geneviève Després	4.375
2013	JoJo the Giant	Jane Barclay & Esperança Melo	4.375
2017	Sometimes I Feel Like a Fox	Danielle Daniel	4.25
2017	The Wolf-Birds	Willow Dawson	4.125
2017	Snap!	Hazel Hutchins & Dušan Petričić	4.125
2013	The Busy Beaver	Nicholas Oldland	4.125
2015	Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress	Christine Baldacchino & Isabelle Malenfant	4
2018	Great	Glen Gretzky, Lauri Holomis & Kevin Sylvester	3.875
2015	The Day My Mom Came to Kindergarten	Maureen Fergus & Mike Lowery	3.875
2014	Oddrey	Dave Whamond	3.875
2018	The Little Boy Who Lived Down the Drain	Carolyn Huizinga Mills & Brooke Kerrigan	3.625
2015	Oddrey and the New Kid	Dave Whamond	3.5
2014	This Is Not My Hat	Jon Klassen	3.5
2017	The Good Little Book	Kyo Maclear & Marion Arbona	3.25
2014	Willow Finds A Way	Lana Button & Tania Howells	2.75

Additionally, four preliminary themes emerged from our analysis: creativity, intergenerational relationships, gender identity and performance, and the natural world. These themes emerged through close reading of the texts. Some books had multiple themes present, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes in the Books Explored in this Article

Year of Nomination	Title of Book	Natural World	Creativity	Intergenerational	Gender Identity/Performance
2018	The Branch	X	X	X	
	The Owl and the Lemming	X			

	Shark Lady	X			X
2017	Snap!		X		
2016	Butterfly Park	X			
	Henry Holton Takes the Ice			X	X
	Super Red Riding Hood			X	X
2015	Mom Came to Kindergarten			X	
	The Highest Number			X	X
	Morris Micklewhite			X	X
	The Most Magnificent Thing		X		
2014	If You Hold A Seed	X		X	
	Oddrey		X		
	Sky Color	X	X		
2013	JoJo the Giant			X	
	The Busy Beaver	X			

Discussion

To give a sense of the four themes that emerged from this analysis, we have chosen four exemplar titles to illustrate each theme, which are discussed in detail here.

The Natural World

Ten books highlight the protagonist's connection to the natural world as a way to develop grittiness. Four books that contain themes of the natural world are Nicholas Oldland's *The Busy Beaver*, Roselynn Akulukjuk's and Amanda Sandland's *The Owl and The Lemming*, and Elly MacKay's *Butterfly Park* and *If You Hold a Seed*.

In *The Busy Beaver*, readers are introduced to "a beaver who was so busy that he didn't always think things through" (Oldland, p. 5, 2011). The beaver never met a job he didn't throw himself into with gusto, but his grit is actually disastrous. He cuts a tree down on himself, landing him in the hospital with no ability to work and plenty of time to think. This unexpected opportunity to reflect leads the beaver toward a shift in his grit: he applies himself to his recovery in order to fix the mistakes his aggressive work ethic left in his wake. This book scored 4.125 on our modified grit scale, offering an interesting example of the ways in which demonstrating grittiness may not always be a positive thing. However, when the beaver shifts his focus, his grit becomes a redeeming quality, allowing him to work through conflict and take responsibility for his actions.

Based on a traditional story from Inuit oral history, *The Owl and The Lemming* (Akulukjuk & Sandland, 2016) is about a lemming that outsmarts an owl trying to catch it for a meal. The lemming realizes that she must trick the owl if she is to make it back to her burrow safely. After two of the lemming's schemes fail to trick the owl, she challenges him to a jumping contest. When the owl takes his turn and jumps, the lemming quickly runs underneath the owl and into her burrow. The young owl then returns to his father who comforts him while advising that next time he not play with his food. The young owl learns his lesson and vows to never let his pride lose his meal. *The Owl and The Lemming* portrays grit in two ways: first, through the lemming that persists despite failing to trick the owl in her first two attempts and second, through the owl that loses his meal but still optimistically plans on how he will improve in his future

hunting attempts. This book draws upon Inuit oral tradition and ecological relationships to provide readers of examples of grit in nature. This book scored a 4.375 on our modified grit scale and is also available as a short film made by the author (see <https://taqcut.com/the-owl-and-the-lemming-2016/> for more information).

MacKay's (2015) *Butterfly Park* tells the story of a young girl who moves from the country to the city with her family. The park next to her new home is called "Butterfly Park," and the girl is excited to go and meet the butterflies. However, the one she meets does not linger in the park, even after the protagonist enlists the help of her neighbor to catch the butterfly and bring it back. Not deterred, the children follow the butterfly, collecting adults and other kids from the neighborhood as they go, until the protagonist realizes that the butterflies will not come back to park without flowers. In a neighbourhood effort, everyone who joined in on the chase gathers together to plant flowers and restore Butterfly Park, bringing back the butterflies and building a beautiful natural space in the middle of the city. With dimensional illustrations that are first painted and then arranged in miniature scenes, which MacKay photographs to create her artwork, this story is one of hope and connection as the girl and her neighbors join together to make something beautiful. *Butterfly Park* scores a 4.75 on our modified grit scale and is one of the highest scoring books in this evaluation.

Using the same distinctive illustration style as *Butterfly Park*, *If You Hold a Seed* (MacKay, 2013) tells of the patience and resilience demonstrated by the main character as they tend a seed to maturity. Opening with the lines, "if you hold a seed, and make a wish, and plant it in the ground...something magical can happen" (p. 3-5), and the book follows the progression from planting and nurturing and waiting, while also presenting a gentle, simple narrative that includes pollination, the cycle of the seasons, and the slow and steady lifespan of a tree. Readers are reminded to be patient as the prose repeats, even as the main character visibly grows up alongside the tree. The ultimate reward of both the tree and the protagonist's patience is that not only the growth of the tree, but that the wish made on the first page comes true on the last page of the book, where both the tree and the protagonist are grown, and the protagonist is able to sit in the branches of the tree and share it with another child (p. 28-32). Both the text and illustrations centre on the natural world, and MacKay's dimensional art shifts through the seasons and the growing cycle of the tree, emphasizing the time it takes for change to occur in the natural world. The narrative demonstrates interest, purpose, hope, and resilience as the protagonist displays grittiness over the seasons and years they are tending the tree, and in our analysis, the book scored 4.5 on our modified grit scale.

Creativity

Nine titles focus on grit as necessary to the creative process, including overcoming setbacks that may occur during a project. Four books that explore the relationship between creativity and grit are Ashley Spires's *The Most Magnificent Thing*, Dave Whamond's *Oddrey*, Peter Reynold's *Sky Color*, and Hazel Hutchins' *Snap!*

The Most Magnificent Thing follows a girl as she attempts to create an idea she has for a contraption. The girl becomes frustrated because after several attempts, none of the contraptions she has created match up to her image of "the most magnificent thing" (Spires, 2014). When her frustration overwhelms her, the girl destroys her latest attempt and quits. During a walk with her dog, the girl comes across all her previous

attempts at her contraption. She begins to feel frustrated again until she notices that, while some things in her past attempts are wrong, some things are right. By observing all the small successes in her past attempts, the girl is able to finally make the most magnificent thing (a side car for her dog that attaches to her scooter). This book portrays the creative process as a series of failures that we can learn from when we reflect on both our failures and successes, and scored a 4.625 on the modified grit scale.

Oddrey (Whamond, 2012) features a protagonist who, like her name, aspires to be a bit odd. She also exhibits grit: interest, practice, purpose, and hope are evident throughout the story. Oddrey "believed it was important to think for herself" (Whamond, 2014, p. 10), as illustrated by the gold chandelier that appears over her head in thought, when her classmates are only topped with cliché lightbulbs, and "she didn't let anything get her down for long. Oddrey knew how to make the best of any situation" (p. 14). When the play is announced, Oddrey is so sure she'll be the star, but she does not allow the fact that she's cast as a tree to diminish her enthusiasm. Instead, she designs a costume and decides that she will be "...the most unique tree ever" (p. 18). Oddrey is not deterred by setbacks, and she is creatively helpful when her classmates forget their lines, but as shown in the way she "saves" the show, her help mostly denies the agency of other characters. The double page spread of the "saving the day" action consists of Oddrey making tracks all over the stage to whisper lines, offer verbal encouragement, help pick up the bricks, and give Dorothy a hand standing back up (all while taking time to dance and spin a bit in between) (p. 22-23). Oddrey does offer encouragement, but more than that, she swoops in and actively corrects the "failed" situations. There's a lot to unpack in a story like this, particularly the constant evidence of grit and growth where Oddrey is concerned, paired with the lack of these attributes Oddrey permits her classmates to demonstrate. However, as a protagonist, Oddrey offers a moderate example of grit, scoring a 3.875 on our modified grit scale.

In *Sky Color*, Peter Reynolds (2012) introduces readers to Marisol, a girl who is an artist, through and through. Marisol has her own art gallery in her home (a room plastered with her drawings and paintings), and she believes that everyone is an artist, and offers gifts and encouragement accordingly to her friends. However, Marisol runs into a problem when her class begins to paint a mural and she cannot find any blue paint to paint the sky. After spending a day and night watching the different sky colors and noticing that she sees far more than blue when she looks up, Marisol is ready to tackle the project with enthusiasm. Her final contribution to the mural is a vibrant sky in just about every color aside from blue, and the pride she takes in her work is clear. *Sky Color* presents a protagonist who demonstrate persistence, passion, and hopeful optimism through not only her own creativity, but her encouragement of others, and this book scored 4.5 on our modified grit scale.

In *Snap!* (Hutchins & Petricic, 2015) the brown crayon from Evan's new crayon set snaps so he attempts to put it back together by pressing, taping, ordering, and staring at it. All of his attempts are unsuccessful but, as if by magic, something changes, and Evan realizes that he now has two brown crayons. When other crayons break, Evan sees them as magically becoming doubles and triples. As Evan continues drawing, his crayons are destroyed in other ways, but he turns their destruction into new ways of drawing—for example, when a red crayon is crushed, he turns it into furry spots. When Evan loses his green crayon, he encounters magic again when he sees green appear where yellow and blue cross each other in one of his pictures. When his purple and orange crayons disappear, Evan finds that he only needs red, blue, and yellow to make

a full rainbow. Eventually Evan realizes that it was him on his own, and not magic, that led to all his creative discoveries. *Snap!* demonstrates how grit plays a crucial role in the creative process as well as how creativity is an important skill for grit. *Snap!* scored a 4.125 on our modified grit scale.

Intergenerational Relationships

Seven titles focus on the importance of intergenerational relationships to the main character and how these relationships are related to the protagonists' development and/or experiences with grit. The majority of these relationships were between a child and their grandparent or parent. However, some books featured an important relationship between a child and an adult community member. Four books that feature intergenerational relationships in relation to grit are Messier's and Pratt's *The Branch*, Macgregor's and Després' *The Highest Number in the World*, Fergus' and Lowery's *The Day My Mom Came to Kindergarten*, and Barclay's and Melo's *JoJo the Giant*.

The protagonist of *The Branch* (Messier & Pratt, 2016) has a favourite branch she plays on in her front yard tree. After an ice storm, the protagonist is deeply upset to find that her favourite branch has snapped off of the tree. Mr. Frank, the protagonist's neighbour, encourages her to create something from the branch so that she can keep and use it. The protagonist has an idea of what to make from the branch but tells Mr. Frank that she does not know how to make it. Mr. Frank offers to help the protagonist so together they turn the branch into a swing for the front yard tree. In *The Branch*, Mr. Frank helps the protagonist develop her grit by acting as her guide. He guides her by both encouraging the protagonist to find a solution for her broken branch problem and by helping her complete her project even after she admits that she does not know how to make a swing. *The Branch* scored a 4.375 on our modified grit scale.

Gabe, short for Gabriella, is a talented hockey player that makes it onto a new hockey team. When Gabe is assigned a jersey number, she receives #9. Gabe is very upset about not having a #22 jersey since #22 is her lucky number. She hides her jersey in her closet and refuses to go to practice. When Gabe's grandmother visits, she shows Gabe a picture from when she snuck onto the boy's hockey team before she was kicked off. Gabe's grandmother convinces Gabe that nine is a lucky number because of the great hockey players who have worn #9 jerseys in the past. Gabe's grandmother tells her that she wore #9 jerseys as a fan because she was not allowed to play on the boys' team. When she goes to practice the next morning, Gabe sets a new goal for herself: to get her #9 jersey in the rafters for both her and her grandmother. In *The Highest Number in the World* (MacGregor & Swenson, 2014), Gabe's grandmother helps Gabe develop her grit by providing the encouragement Gabe needed to practice goal-setting and find new pride in her #9 jersey so that she no longer has to rely on her lucky #22 to play hockey. This title scored a 4.375 on the modified grit scale.

The Day My Mom Came to Kindergarten (Fergus & Lowery, 2013) is a charming story about a girl trying to be patient while her mom makes all the new kid mistakes at kindergarten. The mom decides to accompany her daughter to a day of kindergarten (because the little girl noticed at drop-off that mom was looking a little sad, so she invited her to stay). With a beautifully lighthearted tone, Mom makes gloriously kid-friendly mistakes: she forgets to take off her outside shoes, she slams art supplies down when she gets frustrated, she makes a mess at snack and doesn't clean up, and she even takes such a long restroom break with so much "dawdling" (according to her daughter) that she doesn't get to play music with the rest of the class. At the end

of the day, Mom has mostly adapted to kindergarten, but she is glad to be leaving the hard work of school to her daughter. The relationship between the mother and daughter is central to the narrative, and the role reversal offered by a mom who does not excel at kindergarten offers opportunities for both characters to demonstrate resilience: the mom as she attempts all the new challenges of kindergarten, and the daughter as she tries to cultivate the patience needed to help her mother succeed. Since the daughter is the narrator of the piece, we chose to read her as the protagonist, and the book scored 3.875 on our modified grit scale.

Another story that centers on the relationship between a mother and child is *JoJo the Giant* (Barclay & Melo, 2012). JoJo lives “with his mother and a marmalade cat in an apartment over a deli” (p. 5), and every day, he asks his mother if he has grown yet. Despite her gentle answer (that he has grown the tiniest distance between her two fingers), JoJo continues to embrace his dreams of growing one day, since “the way he saw it, bigger was better. So, he ate all of his broccoli. He drank all of his milk” (p. 9). He enters a race for a chance to win a pair of new sneakers, but the surprise comes not when he wins—he does, in “a burst of broccoli-fueled speed” (p. 26)—but in what he chooses to do with his prize. His mother is a mail carrier, and readers have been told that she is always tired from standing on her feet in her old pair of shoes, and JoJo applies his persistence and hope toward winning the race so he can give *her* the shoes. For JoJo, the relationship he has with his mother serves as the catalyst for the characteristics of grit he displays in the book, leaving JoJo feeling empowered and “ten feet tall” (p. 30) by the end of the narrative. The book scored a 4.375 on our modified grit scale.

Gender Identity and Performance

Six of the books feature protagonists who faced situations in which they question or challenge heteronormative gender roles and identity. Four books that discuss grit in relation questions about gender identity and performance are Bradley’s and Palacios’ *Henry Holton Takes the Ice*, Baldacchino’s and Malenfant’s *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, Dávila’s *Super Red Riding Hood*, and Keating’s and Miguéns’ *Shark Lady: The True Story of How Eugenie Clark Became the Ocean’s Most Fearless Scientist*.

In *Henry Holton Takes the Ice*, Henry is expected to follow family tradition and play hockey but is much happier when he can skate freely. One day, Henry and his mother go to an ice dancing competition and Henry instantly has the desire to learn how to ice dance—the problem is that he does not have figure skates. When he asks his father for figure skates, his father refuses because they are a hockey family and his sister, Sally, says that figure skating is just for girls. Henry refuses to skate until he can use figure skates. When his grandmother shows him a picture of her figure skating, Henry asks to use her old skates. When the rest of Henry’s family sees how beautifully Henry skates in figure skates, his father buys him his own pair and hires an ice dancing coach. In *Henry Holton takes the Ice*, Henry demonstrates grit when he demands to use figure skates and ice dance even though it goes against his family’s tradition and the gender roles associated with hockey and ice dancing. It is worth noting that female characters in this book, including Henry’s sister Sally and his grandmother, are accepted as hockey players even though hockey is typically gendered as male. Where there is a perceived unaccepted resistance to gender roles is when Henry, a boy, wants to participate in an activity that is gendered as female (ice dancing). Henry Holton takes

the Ice has the potential to be a powerful example of grit for male children that do not feel as if they can participate in female gendered activities. *Henry Holton Takes the Ice* (Bradley & Palacious, 2015) scored a 4.625 on the modified grit scale.

In *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* (Baldacchino & Malenfant, 2014), Morris enjoys dressing up at school. His favourite thing to wear is a tangerine dress and shoes that go “click, click, click” (i.e. female dress shoes). Morris is bullied by classmates that tell him that boys do not wear dresses and refuse to play or sit with him because they are afraid that he is going to turn them into girls. Morris is ashamed of the mean things his classmates have said to him and refuses to return to school the next day. With gentle comfort and encouragement from his mother, Morris once again feels proud to wear the tangerine dress—a dress he likes because it reminds him of tigers, the sun, and his mother’s hair. When Morris returns to school and the boys in his class begin teasing him again, Morris begins a new game of spaceship without them. The boys become intrigued by Morris’ game of spaceship because it involves a planet with tigers. When a female classmate tells Morris that only girls wear dresses, he tells her “this boy does.” Morris shows grit when he is bullied and, instead of returning home and feeling ashamed, he chooses to feel proud of himself and stay true to how he wants to express himself despite the gender normativity presented to him by his classmates. This book scored a 4 on our modified grit scale.

Dávila’s (2014) fresh take on a fairy tale, *Super Red Riding Hood*, presents a heroine who uses her desire to be a super hero to help her tap into her own resilience, even when she finds herself facing something scary, since “a superhero must be brave” (p. 15), and “a superhero must be prepared for anything!” (p. 7). When Ruby, the protagonist, faces the wolf in the woods, she uses strength, intelligence, and, ultimately, compassion to solve the situation: it turns out the wolf was chasing her not to attack her, but because she is carrying a lunchbox full of raspberries, and the wolf is hungry. Despite being frightened, Ruby reminds herself that “a superhero always helps those in need” (p. 29), and once she and the wolf reconcile, she happily shares her berries. Ruby’s grit is an interesting blend of traditionally feminine characteristics (such as her compassion and willingness to help others) framed by her alter-ego as a super hero: the book presents an interesting take on feminine strength and empowerment, reaffirmed when the wolf, in the final pages of the story, remarks, “I didn’t know little girls could be superheroes,” to which Ruby responds, ““Oh yes’, said Ruby with a wide smile, ‘we can’” (p. 30-31). The story scored a 4.5 on our modified grit scale.

The only book that scored a perfect 5 on our modified grit scale is the nonfiction picture book *Shark Lady: The True Story of How Eugenie Clark Became the Ocean’s Most Fearless Scientist* (Keating & Alvarez Miguens, 2017). Perhaps it could be argued that the life of Eugenie Clark exhibits such extraordinary characteristics of grit, but as the only nonfiction picture book in this survey, we chose to evaluate the book following the same criteria of the other titles, and since the protagonist (Eugenie herself) is exceptionally gritty, demonstrating passionate interest in her studies and research, persistence, hope, and a strong sense of overall resilience, we decided to include this title in our work. While in school, the narrator tells us, “many were still telling Eugenie what to do. Forget those sharks! Be a secretary! Be a housewife!” (p. 14). In the face of “some of her professors [who] thought women weren’t smart enough to be scientists or brave enough to explore the oceans,” (p. 14), Eugenie continues with her studies, ultimately making important discoveries about sharks and other ocean life. When she earns the title “Shark Lady”, the book tells us that “Eugenie had proven she was smart

enough to be a scientist and brave enough to explore the oceans,” (p. 21), and the final illustration of the book subtly drives home the importance of Eugenie’s gender in relation to her work: at a crowded aquarium, Eugenie is looking on with a smile as another little girl watches the sharks in wide-eyed fascination. An important subtext throughout the book is that Eugenie’s determination and passion helped blaze trails into marine science for other women. As with *Super Red Riding Hood*, *Shark Lady* offers readers with an expanded perspective on what women and girls can accomplish.

Educational Importance of the Study

An examination of these texts offers insight into the materials available to K-2 students as they explore their worlds, learn to make meaning, and begin to internalize the lessons of grit and resilience they are offered. Educators can access these resources in order to consciously scaffold classroom conversations around the passion, persistence, and hopeful resilience that are necessary for the development of grit. Given the already mentioned emphasis on resilience in Ontario classrooms, the results of this study suggest that picture books, specifically the titles in the Ontario Forest of Reading, can serve as powerful teaching tools and mentor texts to facilitate conversations about grit and growth in primary and junior classrooms. These books also open a conversation about the importance of failure and perseverance, since many of the grittiest protagonists fail in various ways as they keep persisting. The authentic integration of grit into the literacy curriculum is an important step toward normalizing conversations surrounding failure and growth, which in turn plays a part in helping students develop their own understanding of and expression of resilience and hope. These abstract concepts can be challenging to integrate into classroom discussions and activities, but the highly gritty books present in the Forest of Reading’s Blue Spruce Award list offer numerous entry points for teachers and librarians to bring these topics into the classroom.

One major limitation of this study is the absence of teacher and student perspectives on the Forest of Reading. Future work might build from the grit scores established here and use the high scoring books as a launch point for further explorations of the ways teachers and students are actually interacting with these gritty texts. An additional area of study would be to look closely at the grit differences between winners and nominees; the nominees are curated by teachers and librarians, but the winners are voted on by young readers, and it is possible that students are seeking something other than books that can serve as mentors in resilience. The possibility for future work on the Forest of Reading is exciting, and a space we hope others will step into.

Conclusion

Grit is not the only valuable collection of traits we can hope to model for our students, but the persistence, resilience, and passion that exemplifies this idea makes it particularly resonant as we move forward in our increasingly complex, technologically advanced world. Children’s literature has a great deal of power when it comes to shaping personalities, and these personalities, both young and old, may ultimately rewrite the paradigms of our cultures. The Forest of Reading is doing powerful work toward cultivating authentic, excited readers, while also presenting stories that, in some way, are representative of the Canadian experience. Further, these tales are still able to cross cultural boundaries in the way that good stories can. As Leavy points out, “Just

as texts can be an integral part in creating and maintaining the status quo, so too can they help challenge long-held beliefs and practices” (2007, p. 7). Context is important, however, and we think it is important to remember that the Forest is something distinctly Canadian, deliberately rooted in Canadian identity, and used to promote a sense of pride and identity in readers of all ages. These award-winning regional titles, in part, answer Cynthia Chambers’s demand that “Canadians need a literature about ‘here’ because this is where we live,” while also, it would seem, playing a major part in the second half of Chambers’s argument, that “Canadians also need a form of curriculum theorizing grounded in ‘here’” (Chambers, p. 144).

Even as the Forest of Reading is firmly rooted in a Canadian context, the award winners and nominees offer an interesting collection of contemporary children’s literature across cultural boundaries. Since award-winning children’s literature plays a significant role in curriculum development, and since the Blue Spruce Award books are linked so explicitly with early learning, it is important to continue to examine the wealth of regional literature in the Forest of Reading in order to understand what lessons, both implicit and explicit, may be presented in classrooms that rely on this reader-voted program to foster literacy and student interaction.

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