The Problem with Grit: Dismantling Deficit Thinking in Library Instruction

Eamon Tewell

abstract: This paper critiques deficit models of education, including popular educational movements such as grit and growth mind-set, and considers how they inform and underlie information literacy efforts, often without librarians' awareness. After a discussion of the problems that deficit thinking poses for students and educators, the author offers two alternative approaches, critical information literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, with examples of how they can guide library instruction. This paper provides readers with an understanding of deficit models and what they look like in library instruction, and describes effective counterapproaches and specific examples to put alternative principles into practice.

Introduction

Few ideas in the last decade have resonated as strongly with the American public as that of grit. As a personality trait to be cultivated, grit has been offered as a way to solve underachievement and dissatisfaction in schools, the workplace, and interpersonal relationships. Commonly defined as perseverance combined with passion for a long-term goal, grit has been offered as a commodity for self-help and motivational purposes through best-selling books, testing software, and other marketable products. A related and extremely popular idea, growth mind-set, is the concept that one's intelligence can "grow," a belief that improves

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personal success and educational outcomes. The phenomena of grit and growth mind-set, and the values of individualism and persistence associated with them, encapsulate much of what many people want to believe about learning and effort—that hard work pays off and achievement is strictly a matter of applying oneself. These ideas now influence higher education and academic libraries' instructional efforts as well.

Beyond grit and growth mind-set, an overarching idea underpins much of not only information literacy (IL) and education more generally but also much thinking in American society. It may take the form of "leaning in," resilience, or meritocracy, but deficit thinking lies at the root of much educational theory and practice, including academic library instruction. The deficit model of education focuses on learners' weaknesses, including the knowledge, motivation, or cultural values that they presumably lack. First widely theorized and applied in the 1960s and 1970s, the deficit model provided an easy explanation for why some students could not achieve as much as others: these learners simply were not applying themselves.

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Deficit models have seen a resurgence in the last decade under different names, most notably grit and growth mind-set. As two concepts comprised of qualities consistent with deficit thinking, grit and growth mind-set focus on shifting people's perspective toward challenges they face and instilling the belief that individuals can "grow" desirable characteristics or attitudes. For advocates of these ideas, these notions offer a solution to low academic performance: if teachers help learners become grittier or grow their mind-set, students can achieve excellence despite their circumstances. Yet, when taken too far, these theories that intend to motivate learners are extensions of deficit thinking. Grit presumes that learners who do not measure up simply need to locate their perseverance and passions. Mind-set theory begins with the premise that people who possess or develop a growth mind-set advance their intellect through hard work and dedication. It creates an environment, however, where students are defined in terms of deficits and their lack of perseverance in striving toward goals determined by an educational system that is structurally unjust. In both cases, the students must have their deficits remedied by the learning theory.

These approaches perpetuate several major issues, including naturalizing ingrained forms of oppression, requiring the most marginalized learners to put in the most work, and encouraging people to adapt to broken systems instead of questioning them. Educators applying these pedagogies often have only the best of intentions. As David Webster and Nicola Andrews observe regarding educational approaches that overemphasize self-efficacy, "Many of us working in the University sector want to help our students and colleagues cope and thrive; this is in part why discourses of resilience have flourished."[1] However, when these ideas are applied, they put the blame for a lack of learning on students, ignoring the systemic issues that impact them.

Grit and growth mind-set increasingly appear in academic library conference presentations and the professional literature, without significant attention to the ways

that such viewpoints limit both teachers' and students' potential. What can be done to counter the deficit model in library instruction? Critical information literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy set aside the assumption that student achievement primarily results from effort and engagement. Regarding the dominant narratives of individualism and meritocracy as problems is an important approach for librarians to take in their instruction and can be addressed through different lenses, such as information privilege and the construction of authority. Additionally, students can create counter-narratives, supplying their own stories instead of accepting the dominant ones.

This paper contends that deficit thinking is a major characteristic of educational theories that have become increasingly influential in academic library instruction. It proposes that to provide meaningful education, librarians must actively identify deficit thinking in action, pursue teaching that centers on student knowledge, and consider issues on a systemic rather than individual level. By analyzing grit and growth mind-set as articulated through prominent works, by considering how these ideas guide understandings of IL, and by presenting counterarguments and alternative educational approaches, this study will prompt reevaluation of educational movements that may appear useful at first glance but often mask structural inequalities in their application. This paper will first provide context regarding deficit thinking, the development of grit and growth mind-set, and how these approaches are adopted and reinscribed in IL instruction.

Definitions

Deficit thinking refers to various theories and ideas based on a person or group of people lacking a desired quality. These perceived deficits can be rooted in linguistic differences, cultural diversity, or the insufficient development of some type of literacy, such as information literacy. In this line of thinking, a deficiency needs to be remedied. As a concept applied to social programs, national policy, and other realms, deficit thinking operates under the assumption that a given population exists in a state of need. Most often, the ideal means of addressing this need is for the people with the perceived deficit to apply themselves, to conform, or otherwise to assimilate to dominant culture. Under this ideology, as Professor of Integrative Studies Paul Gorski describes, people "are the problem; their attitudes, behaviors, cultures, and mindsets block their potential for success."[2]

In the landmark volume *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking*, educational psychologist Richard Valencia describes how deficit thinking morphs to suit different political climates and aligns neatly with values of individualism and self-help.[3] The proclaimed cause of various deficits has changed depending on the era, but the problem is ultimately identified at a personal level. The phrase *deficit model* is more specific than the umbrella term and is often applied to education. The existence of deficit models in the United States can be traced to the "culture of poverty" research of the 1960s and 1970s, which asserted that the customs and lifestyle of people living in poverty were the root cause of their impoverishment. Regarding education, Valencia observes that "the deficit thinking framework holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, while institutional structures and inequitable schooling arrangements that exclude students from learning are held exculpatory."[4]

Some scholars argue that the appeal of deficit models lies in their adherence to the scientific method, thus providing a certain credence across various fields and levels of expertise, as well as in people's preference for an explanation of educational disparities in which they have no role.[5] As Curt Dudley-Marling states, "No sophisticated analysis is required to explain the powerful appeal of a deficit model that blames *them*, and not *us*, over a complex, institutional analysis in which we all share some responsibility."[6] Deficit thinking can be weaponized in many ways in the classroom, including negatively influencing students' social class identities.[7] Moreover, as librarians Chelsea Heinbach, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, Rosan Mitola, and Emily Pattni argue, the set of assumptions that comprise deficit thinking "manifests in practice by believing that students who in any way do not conform to a 'traditional' or privileged financial situation, home life, or route to education are not likely to succeed." The traditional path, in this view, is that of white, middle-class young adults who attend college soon after high school and whose parents also followed this trajectory.[8] One of the most prevalent educational movements aligned with deficit thinking is the idea of grit, which has found great popularity in the K–12 and higher education sectors.

The Concept of Grit

Grit skyrocketed into popular culture with author and psychology professor Angela Duckworth's best seller *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, along with her hugely popular TED (technology, entertainment, and design) Talk on the subject.[9] Using her research as well as interviews with people referred to as "paragons of grit," Duckworth's *Grit* argues that the trait is developed through a combination of drive and persistence: sustained effort over a long period, combined with a deep passion for a goal. The book is inspired by and partially based upon research conducted by Duckworth on grit as a personality trait, in particular an influential 2007 study which found that "the achievement of difficult goals entails not only talent but also the sustained and focused application of talent over time."[10] *Grit* is intended for an audience as broad as possible, but Duckworth's original research was based in primary education, with the expectation that if teachers help children become grittier, they can achieve excellence despite their school or community's conditions.[11] Educators across the world have taken to the idea of grit. Numerous books have extolled the importance of instilling passion and perseverance in students.[12] Fostering grit is increasingly applied to higher education, particularly as a potential predictor of grade point average (GPA), retention, and other measures of academic success.[13]

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The construct of grit and the accompanying literature have received some criticism. Drawing upon her experiences with high school students at the Boston Arts Academy in Massachusetts, Linda Nathan challenges the narrative that students need to simply

apply themselves to overcome inequalities.[14] The scientific foundations of grit have been questioned in a meta-analysis positing that the effects of grit on performance and success have been overstated and that the validity of grit as a psychological construct should be reevaluated. Grit's applications and ideological functions within higher education have also been thoroughly reviewed and critiqued.[15]

Growth Mind-Set

Grit and growth mind-set share some notable qualities, in particular an emphasis on perseverance, shifting one's attitude toward challenges, and the idea that people can "grow" these positive characteristics. When asked about the similarities between grit and growth mind-set, Duckworth responded:

> Carol Dweck, more than anyone else, is a role model for me . . . One thing we've found is that children who have more of a growth mindset tend to be grittier. The correlation isn't perfect, but this suggests to me that one of the things that makes you gritty is having a growth mindset. The attitude "I can get better if I try harder" should help make you a tenacious, determined, hard-working person.[16]

While the ideas of individual and collective mind-sets have long been established, psychologist Carol Dweck has contributed two categories of mind-sets that people adopt, based on how they understand their intelligence and how they react to failure: growth and fixed. Dweck's *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* has been hugely popular since its publication in 2006 and is advertised as "the book that has changed millions of lives."[17] A fixed mind-set is described as "believing that your qualities are carved in stone," whereas a growth mind-set is "based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts."[18] Dweck has conducted a number of studies on the concept with other researchers, providing educational as well as policy recommendations through works that propose mind-set as a way to "temper the effects of poverty" and promote personal resilience.[19]

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Growth mind-set has been put forward as an intervention to address the achievement gap among students as well as an approach that universities should adopt institution-wide.[20] Like grit, growth mind-set has been criticized for various reasons. These critiques measure the mind-sets of university applicants and find no association between a growth mind-set and academic success, evaluate the scientific validity of the mind-set literature by conducting meta-analyses, and apply critical race theory to address the whiteness implicit in motivation research.[21]

Analysis

Based on an analysis of selected high-profile publications on grit and growth mind-set, as well as literature on these topics related to IL, this section provides an overview of these publications' claims and how the authors who brought these concepts to popular culture have responded to their adoption and implementation.

Grit in Education

Duckworth has explored the nature of success for years, having worked in various careers before beginning as a psychology graduate student interviewing leaders in various fields and asking, "Who are the people at the very top of your field? What are they like? What do you think makes them special?"[22] Ultimately, these highly successful people not only were "unusually resilient and hardworking" but also kept their goals firmly in mind. "They not only had determination, they had *direction*."[23] In short, they had a combination of passion and perseverance that Duckworth coined as *grit*. In a significant sense, "Grit is about holding the same top-level goal," otherwise known as one's passion or life philosophy, "for a very long time."[24] Duckworth offers two equations which explain how a person gets from talent to achievement:

talent × effort = skill
skill × effort = achievement.

Notably, both equations contain *effort*, and as Duckworth titles one chapter of *Grit* "Effort Counts Twice."[25] Other "psychological assets that mature paragons of grit have in common" consist of interest, practice, purpose, and hope.[26] In her book *Grit in the Classroom*, which applies ideas from *Grit*, educator Laila Sanguras summarizes grit as being about internal fortitude and zeal, and goes on to describe other key characteristics of a gritty student: self-discipline, perseverance, and passion.[27] Sanguras says persistence should not to be confused with compliance, which is "something forced onto you"; showing tenacity, "especially in an imperfect situation, shows that you are trustworthy."[28] This fine line between the two, and especially how promoting perseverance can be a means of ensuring compliance, will be further considered in the "Critiques" section.

Duckworth's research with Dweck is referred to in *Grit*, wherein a study involving high school students found that those with a growth mind-set were "significantly grittier than students with a fixed mindset" and would more likely enroll and persist in college.[29] The imperative to take every opportunity possible to establish a gritty disposition or growth mind-set in students is echoed across both approaches, summarized by Sanguras's advising teachers to "never miss a moment to bring grit to the forefront of your students' minds."[30] The goal is to make grit second nature. Though we face limits in talent and opportunity, Duckworth notes, "More often than we think, our limits are self-imposed."[31] If grit is offered as the best option for progress, most people will accept it.

Intrinsic to the appeal of grit is its professed ability to be measured with relative ease. Duckworth and her research colleagues had no instrument to assess grit, and so they developed one. Duckworth published a 10-item "Grit Scale" in *Grit*, and 8- and 12-item scales are also used. The efforts to establish grit's veracity and truthfulness through connecting it to measurement and the sciences are foundational to author and journalist

Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*. The book is an appeal to the importance of developing character qualities in children, with the best intentions for young people and students struggling with poverty and inequality. "What matters," Tough writes, "is whether we are able to help [children] develop a very different set of qualities [than simply learning information], a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence."[32] Tough argues that these qualities are improved by encountering and overcoming failure. Claims of character development offer an easy way to establish social control of students, and such assertions encourage the notion that young adults must rise to the challenge of developing value-laden and culturally contextual qualities without significant support to do so.

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Duckworth has generally responded positively to how grit has been applied in education, with the exception of the use of grit as a measure for high-stakes testing, such as admissions or course grades.[33] In one of Duckworth's acknowledgments of the societal factors that shape a person's life, she notes in regard to "impersonal influences like toxins in the environment, food insecurity, inadequate health care and housing, and racial discrimination" that "all of those problems are genuine and important."[34] At the same time, these issues "don't accurately represent the biggest obstacles to academic success that poor children, especially very poor children, often face," which are a stressful home life and lack of a relationship with a caregiver.[35] Managing stress appears to be the ultimate indicator of success, and it even acts to absolve societal ills because "there is no antipoverty tool we can provide for disadvantaged young people that will be more valuable than the character strengths . . . conscientiousness, grit, resilience, perseverance, and optimism."[36] The implied necessity of "keeping up" in today's environment underpins many of the assumptions behind grit.[37]

Growth Mind-Set in Education

The construct of mind-set, particularly growth mind-set, has increased exponentially in popularity due largely to the prolific work of Carol Dweck. Mind-set has been posited as an explanatory tool for academic underachievement and a way for educators and learners to increase success in school, and it has been tied to grit, resilience, and other concepts. One influential and highly cited study by Dweck and David Scott Yeager claims that personal resilience is crucial for success in school and in life, and argues that students' mind-sets impact their academic and social resilience.[38] The authors conclude the paper by considering three issues that summarize their concerns:

> (a) how efforts to change mindsets can increase resilience even without removing the adversities students encounter in school, (b) what parents and educators should say (or avoid saying) in order to support students' growth-oriented implicit theories in school, and (c) how implicit theories interventions should be scaled up.[39]

Many other authors have expanded upon and expressed the central ideas of growth mind-set in different ways, such as finding techniques to give children a "yes brain" instead of a "no brain."[40] A major articulation of Dweck's mind-set theory, read and applied more broadly than the many academic studies exploring the idea, is her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.*

The central claim of *Mindset* is described a few pages into the introduction. "For thirty years," Dweck writes, "my research has shown that *the view you adopt for yourself* profoundly affects the way you lead your life" (emphasis in original).[41] The fixed mind-set is described as "believing your qualities are carved in stone," while the growth mind-set is "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts."[42] For growth mind-set, then, effort can make you smart or talented. A revealing quotation comes from Dweck's cousin at a low point in her life: "I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and feel sorry for myself!" The author suggests this declaration could be the mantra of growth mind-set.[43] Individual initiative as the answer to difficulty is present throughout the book. On the first page, Dweck points to mind-set as a way for readers to understand "the greats" and the "would-have-beens," categorizing people into two different camps based on their mind-set.[44]

Mindset often offers brief testimonials in the form of a short letter from someone who successfully achieved a growth mind-set. One chapter features "three great teachers" who have worked with either marginalized or "supertalented" students. One thing the teachers have in common is that they give their all to their students, which is admirable but presents issues in terms of burnout, overwork, and compensation.[45] An emphasis on saying the "right" thing to students is repeated often in Dweck's work. For example, a brief article titled "Even Geniuses Work Hard" describes a culture of risk-taking as resulting from providing the right kinds of praise and encouragement, including emphasizing the word "yet."[46] Dweck explains, "Whenever students say they can't do something or are not good at something, the teacher should add, 'yet.'"[47]

Dweck has responded to how her work has been used, both in *Mindset* and other publications.[48] She terms the misuse, misapplication, or misunderstanding as "False Growth Mindset." Dweck describes growth mind-set as "believing people can develop their abilities" before moving on to common misunderstandings, including believing a growth mind-set is only about effort and praising the endeavor instead of the process.[49] A brief commentary titled "Carol Dweck Revisits the 'Growth Mindset'" puts other common misconceptions to rest: a growth mind-set is not solely about effort, the fixed mind-set should not attempt to be banished, and students who put in effort but do not learn are inappropriately awarded with praise.[50] Dweck is clearly concerned with how the idea is misused and how the message she and other researchers convey may be improved. She writes in *Mindset*, "It broke my heart to learn that some educators and coaches were blaming kids for having a fixed mindset" and said, "We as educators must take seriously our responsibility to create growth-mindset-friendly environments."[51] This raises additional questions, however: What about environments that address issues of race, class, and gender? To what end is a growth mind-set pursued?

Much as Duckworth does in *Grit*, Dweck nods to factors outside people's personal control. In a section titled "Questions and Answers," the author addresses several questions that have been raised before. To one question, Dweck explains, "It's true that effort

is crucial—no one can succeed for long without it—but it's certainly not the only thing."[52] As an example, Dweck offers the fact that people with money, access to a quality education, and a network of influential friends, and "people who know how to be in the right place at the right time" will more likely see their work pay off. Despite acknowledging different factors related to achievement, *Mindset* still tends to overemphasize individual effort and achievement: "The fixed mindset is so very tempting. It seems to promise children a lifetime of worth, success, and admiration for just sitting there and being who they are."[53]

Information Literacy

How does deficit thinking inform information literacy? An overemphasis on certain types of information within definitions of information literacy and in library instruction limits the ways students and teachers approach IL. The information valued is textual, academic, peer-reviewed, based upon the scientific method, and produced in the Global North—often defined as the United States, Canada, Europe, Israel, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, and New Zealand. How information literacy is currently conceived and practiced narrows the conversation of what IL is and how it can be addressed in the classroom. By framing IL within these limited confines, learners with knowledge and experience outside these parameters are considered deficient. As LIS professor Annemaree Lloyd states:

> The current dominant paradigm of information literacy emphasizes the importance of connecting with textual information. This produces a deficit model of information literacy which does not take into account the importance of informal learning or other sources of information which are accessed through communication or action.[54]

The influence of grit and growth mind-set continues to be felt within academic librarianship, across conference presentations, blog posts, articles, and book chapters. For instance, the 2017 book *Learner-Centered Pedagogy: Principles and Practice* by Kevin Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook includes a chapter that introduces librarians to growth mind-set and provides practice-based examples. Klipfel and Cook summarize the theory's tenets and identify qualities of a growth mind-set: process orientation, persistence, and grit.[55] The two authors focus on the process element of a growth mind-set and argue for making process central to reference and instruction interactions with students. One lesson is that the type of praise one offers is of major importance. To this end, the authors provide examples of what process praise looks like, such as, "You worked hard on developing that list of keywords, and it really paid off in the interesting and precise searches you were able to construct."[56]

Klipfel and Cook acknowledge critiques of growth mind-set and associated motivational theories.[57] The authors echo Dweck's response to these criticisms, which is that teachers must carefully apply ideas from her theory to avoid unintended effects. They also note that hard work and persistence are only part of the mind-set approach. Compared to Dweck, Klipfel and Cook's consideration of mind-set is measured in regards to its potential outcomes: "A comprehensive approach to growth mindset—including an emphasis on hard work as well as persistence, acknowledgement that intelligence is not a static quality, consistent and meaningful feedback, and a focus on process—*can* lead to the outcomes promised by mindset theory."[58]

Dweck's theories of intelligence have been applied to reference and instruction work in other venues as well.[59] An article by librarian Amanda Folk looks to Dweck's theories to potentially "provide some insight regarding how academic librarians can promote and develop the dispositions of an information-literate individual" and surveys whether academic librarians believe the mind-set tenet that intelligence can be developed, both for themselves and for students.[60] Folk states that while "neither theory of intelligence is inherently better than the other . . . a librarian's theory of intelligence could have implications for how he or she interacts with students and contributes to the development of students' information literacy skills."[61] Regarding applications to reference and instruction, Folk recommends reflective practice and offering students process praise and process feedback.[62] In a conference paper, Folk, Kelly Safin, and Anna Mary Williford consider student mind-sets in connection with research consultations, considering academic librarians' roles in helping learners develop persistence. They offer strategies for bringing a growth mind-set and a focus on process into consultations, but they give no consideration to larger social factors that shape attitudes toward learning and research.[63]

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How a problem is defined determines how it is approached. The appeal of deficit models is that they allow teachers to describe problems in ways that call for straightforward and practical solutions; if we cultivate grit in students, they will become more information literate. As librarian Darren Ilett suggests, "Rather than acting as obstacles to success in college, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students gain from their families, communities, work experiences, and previous education can form the basis on which to expand their learning, including in the area of information literacy."[64] What would it look like to value student knowledge and contributions while acknowledging and identifying ways to change systemic issues?

Critiques

Deficit thinking is a prominent element of higher education that begins before students even enroll. Prospective students take standardized admission tests, and, if accepted, they take placement tests that supposedly pinpoint their greatest deficits. They then spend a portion of their first year correcting for these deficits in remedial classes for which they receive no course credits. There has been considerable critique from educators and social commentators concerning deficit models, grit, and growth mind-set.[65] The main points from this literature will be synthesized in this discussion, followed by alternatives to such pedagogies. In particular, these criticisms of grit and growth mind-set claim that they contribute to maintaining inequality and naturalizing oppression; require learners defined as minorities by their racial, sexual, gender, ability, and class identities to put in the most effort; shift blame to the individual; and augment the myth of meritocracy.

Characteristics associated with grit, especially perseverance, can be indeed be helpful. When students face an unexpected setback, or when they struggle with a major issue—such as their own or someone else's illness, homelessness, a lack of food, difficulty

making ends meet financially, or handling caretaking duties—addressing these issues can be the single most important thing. Perseverance, or having an end goal that provides light at the end of the tunnel, is highly significant in times of crisis. The core messages that grit and growth mind-set express—that our situations are not predetermined and our effort can make a difference—are potentially useful and hard to disagree with at face value. People sometimes claim that grit and the difficulties they experienced made them the person they are today. Identifying as having grit can give people a sense of pride, in the same way that being resilient or having a growth mind-set is an indicator of withstanding adversity and coming out ahead due to one's strength and adaptability. At the same time, these concepts also aid in promoting conservative ideologies that thrive on perpetuating myths about effort and achievement.[66]

Maintaining Inequality

Grit and other deficit models are fundamentally about how best to maintain the functioning of our existing systems, without requiring significant changes or sacrifices on the part of privileged classes. As education professor Ethan Ris argues, "The grit discourse allows privileged socioeconomic groups to preserve their position under the guise of creative pedagogy," and, importantly, "This phenomenon can coexist with perfectly benign intentions."[67] Grit is an overly simplified answer to entrenched problems, requiring students to adapt to a broken system and failing to engage with the core causes of educational disparities. Grit and growth mind-set tend to downplay that the students at the greatest disadvantage, who show up for school despite the barriers they experience, are already the most gritty. What about learners who lack the resources to find their passion or the teaching and mentoring to inspire them to keep digging in?

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Continuing to propagate grit narratives serves to maintain social and educational inequity, wherein the only resources allocated are words of encouragement. Unless the root causes of inequality are addressed, race, class, and gender discrimination will persist and flourish. As columnist Aisha Sultan writes, "Educators and administrators tend to overestimate the power of the person and underestimate the power of the situation."[68] Regarding growth mind-set specifically, author Alfie Kohn observes that this perspective reflects a "tradition [which] has always been to adjust yourself to conditions as you find them because those conditions are immutable; all you can do is decide on the spirit in which to approach them."[69] What is the purpose of a learning environment where students are never encouraged

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to question but only urged to continue playing the rigged game, which they have little chance of winning?

Requiring More from Marginalized Students

Because grit and growth mind-set tend to obscure systemic issues and operate under the assumption that education takes place in an environment requiring the same degree of effort from everyone, they demand more from marginalized students. In encouraging the attitude that "race does not matter," for example, "racial issues can conveniently be explained or excused as singular matters to be solved by individual intervention."[70] The cultural values present in formal education and schooling—including the ways that education often serves to perpetuate dominant cultural values of whiteness, patriarchy, and heterosexism unless it is actively and continually questioned—are essential to consider. These values extend to what types of knowledge and literacies are acknowledged and rewarded. As education professor Django Paris declares, deficit approaches "view the languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being of many students and communities of color as deficiencies to be overcome in learning that demanded and legitimized dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling."[71]

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Instead of lessening educational disparities, grit and growth mind-set reinscribe them. The people not asked to show grit are the ones creating the terms and conditions. Grit and growth mind-set emphasize character qualities and soft skills, character traits and interpersonal skills such as getting along with other people. Educational researcher Andre Perry comments on the unfairness of focusing on soft skills, particularly when asked of students of color: "Certainly we need to help youths cope with poor-performing systems, but the elevation of soft skills as the new way forward to improve outcomes for youths of color essentially encourages them to adapt to inequality."[72] Moreover, the learners most often targeted by the grit and growth mind-set models are frequently students of color from low-income families.[73] Writing about Black students and the demand for grit, education professor Ebony McGee calls for a commitment to examine our institutions:

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> The education community thus should contemplate how much grit and perseverance are healthy, and at what point we are asking students to compensate for society's failure to address structural and institutional injustices. The question before us is this: Should we ask Black students to become grittier and more resilient, or should the education system commit to disarming the structures of racism so that Black students do not have to push to the point of compromising their mental and physical well-being in order to succeed?[74]

Redirecting Blame to the Individual

Part of the appeal of deficit models lies in shifting responsibility away from oneself. No one wants to be implicated in a system that maintains major barriers to academic and personal achievement, and grit and growth mind-set can allow educators and institutions to absolve themselves from blame and disregard their entanglement with larger issues. When people's perseverance, self-discipline, or effort are made the focus, we will less likely question the policies, institutional decisions, and political environments that shape students' classroom or life experience. This benefits those in positions of power because the onus for change is placed on individuals with the least power and ability to create structural transformation. Ris, for example, argues that grit "blames the victims of entrenched poverty, racism, or inferior schooling for character flaws that caused their own disadvantage."[75] This emphasis on the individual as the one to blame also means that achievement is meant to be the primary source of pride. In turn, students' academic achievements are attributed to their gritty outlook or their mind-set instead of the different means of support from which they may have benefited. Concerning LIS specifically, David James Hudson contends that a focus on individual responses to systemic issues, and in particular an emphasis on personal cultural competence, obscures the systemic nature of racism that involves us all.[76]

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Students gain knowledge of more than just academic subjects when they attend college. They also learn cultural values and absorb much about their position in relation to structures of power. Routine classroom practices and interactions impart significant meaning. This can be especially true for first-generation students, who will often be attuned to social cues and messages about who belongs in higher education and who does not. First-generation students will more likely be required to take remedial courses and will less likely seek help from academic advising or during professors' office hours. They may not realize that such assistance is available to them. Grit encourages persistence, but when students with less knowledge about the workings of higher education are urged to persevere, they may feel that they do not belong on campus or deserve to work toward a degree.

First-generation students will more likely be required to take remedial courses and will less likely seek help from academic advising or during professors' office hours.

Promoting the Myth of Meritocracy

The emphasis on self-reliance as the basis of grit and growth mind-set, as described earlier, ties in directly with the myth of meritocracy and the idea that achievement is

created and sustained individually. As a result, a concept that on first glance appears to promote personal agency in an empowering way translates in practice to "an accusatory and evaluative gaze on the individual," as education professor Paul Thomas states.[77] The ideal of meritocracy, much like grit and growth mind-set, assumes that the best and brightest rise to the top based on their hard work and determination, without regard for the historical and present-day subordination of many groups. Writing about grit specifically, education professor Lauren Anderson argues that the idea reflects "long legacies of victim-blaming, [and] the tendency (especially among the privileged) to emphasize individualism and personal traits over material conditions and social structures, as the core determinants of academic 'success.'"[78] A foundational element of grit and growth mind-set, then, is the belief in meritocracy and pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, ideas as essential to American ideology as they are to maintaining inequality.[79]

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Generally speaking, grit prioritizes sticking to one thing and not deviating. As defined in Duckworth's research and enacted in many schools, grit focuses on traditional measures of academic success, such as good grades and regular attendance. Unwavering dedication on the part of college students, particularly within the metrics defined by institutions to constitute success, such as retention, academic performance, and attainment, can just as easily result in burnout and massive debt. These measures show serious disparities between white students and African American and Latinx students.[80] Moreover, they are a tool for enforcing discipline within the classroom or institution more broadly. Regarding the related concept of resilience, feminist writer Sara Ahmed states, it is "a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased."[81] Teachers can become hostile to students who do not perform as expected. Much discourse concerning international students, for example, fixates on challenges they face, including English-speaking skills, low classroom participation, and different understandings of what constitutes plagiarism, all of which require contextualization to understand.[82] Students from low-income households are often labeled as "underprepared" for college-level work, while others are called "entitled" or "coddled" because they require support.[83]

Deficit models view students as perpetual lacking and at fault. This belief is neither healthy nor accurate. Instead, we need to remain open to broader ways of engaging students and of thinking about their lives, consider what power they really have to effect change, and where we share some responsibility. It is essential to examine how issues of access and equity shape our students' experiences and to question how success is defined and attained.

Alternatives

To move past teaching that conceives of learners as possessing inherent deficits, educators in academic libraries should pursue ways to center structural understandings of justice along with students' experiences and knowledge. Critical information literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy are two frameworks with overlapping interests and approaches that facilitate this type of education. These modes of teaching are intended to recognize the inequalities embedded within the information landscape and the educational system. Used together, with elements of both informing one's pedagogy, they will help teachers develop a structural ideology—an understanding of relationships between structural inequalities and educational outcome disparities—rather than a deficit ideology.[84] Critical information literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy will be described in the following sections, with examples of how each is being implemented in library instruction.

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Critical Information Literacy

Critical information literacy is a theory and practice that asks librarians to involve themselves and their patrons in the sociopolitical dimensions of libraries and information. As stated by librarians Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, critical information literacy "takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption."[85] A subset of critical librarianship, critical information literacy aims to question dominant forces in society and to uncover and challenge how racism, sexism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression shape libraries and the greater information landscape. While such goals are ambitious given the limitations of library instruction, librarians conducting this work have found it meaningful, and it can be accomplished in various ways, ranging from stand-alone instruction sessions to credit-bearing courses.[86]

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Critical information literacy has much to offer in problematizing narratives of individualism and meritocracy, beliefs that work against low-income students, first-generation students, students with disabilities, and students of color. This can be accomplished by applying different lenses to library instruction, such as information privilege and the construction of authority. Librarians can easily introduce these concepts as they are manifested in scholarly communication, such as how the definition of an expert changes when applied to different fields. Librarians Char Booth, Sarah Hare,

and Cara Evanson have written about information privilege in instruction and outreach, and a toolkit from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, provides many ideas for teaching about this topic.[87]

If a library instructor teaches a class where the students investigate a topic of their choice, for example, the librarian might take advantage of that openness to explore the economics of scholarly communication. Drawing attention to who has access to crucial and up-to-date information can lead to further conversations. Another topic that troubles the idea of meritocracy is that of who can or cannot publish on a given subject. This question can be posed on a worksheet or in discussions. Who can or cannot publish is linked to numerous issues concerning authority and how one's authority changes in relation to a subject or setting.

How one teaches is just as important as what is discussed. Using the foundation of critical information literacy, which encourages action as well as reflection, there are many ways to demonstrate to students that their contributions matter: asking them for search terms, having time for students to provide feedback on what they learned or still have questions about, or asking them to present to their classmates on the results of a database search. The critical library instruction literature includes sources for lesson plans and other ideas to apply to one's teaching.[88]

Too frequently, library instruction approaches learners with the goal of demonstrating the immediate relevance of the library to students, instead of balancing this need with acknowledging broader information contexts. Likely without realizing it, library instructors attempt to make the case to students that "you need us," whereas a more useful approach would be "your perspective is valued." These signals occur early in class, such as with an icebreaker activity. Some icebreakers, even those as seemingly simple as asking about someone's research topic, can make students who are unsure how to respond or provide the "right" answer uncomfortable. Instead, instructors might share their own background and context, modeling a degree of vulnerability before asking students to share. For instance, librarians who have spent years working in libraries could draw attention to the fact that they are familiar with many of the conventions of academic resources and as a result might skip over terms or processes that are unfamiliar to students, and when they do, students should not hesitate to ask for clarification. Teachers who were first in their family to attend college might wish to share that information with a class. Librarians may also review their lesson plans to identify any assumptions they might have made concerning student resources at their disposal (for example, that students have purchased the required textbooks or will travel home during holiday breaks).

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An approach informed by critical information literacy can mean identifying ways to overtly acknowledge and articulate the knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Students already evaluate information in a variety of ways, and activities designed around learners' existing methods of evaluation and locating trustworthy information can encourage students to critically question how sources are socially constructed as

authorities.[89] To move past a deficit model that assumes students have no understanding of searching library resources and thus little to contribute to an instruction session, librarians should seek ways to acknowledge the years of information-seeking experience many students do have as well as sources of information beyond the library, such as friends and family, personal and work experience, and online search engines and social media.

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Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

The work done by many educators and scholars in culturally oriented teaching is a useful direction for librarians interested in intentionally bringing identity and experiences to the forefront of the classroom. This provides the opportunity to meaningfully connect students' lives and existing knowledge to the library and to research and information more broadly. Culturally relevant pedagogy was first given form by theorist and teacher educator Gloria Ladson-Billings, and a number of researchers have expanded on these ideas since.[90] Culturally relevant pedagogy has three criteria: the development of academic skills, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. It is a direct response to deficit models, which have historically had the goal to "eradicate the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices many students of color brought from their homes and communities and to replace them with what were viewed as superior practices."[91] Django Paris suggests the term "relevant" has outlived its use and proposes "sustaining" to address the need to maintain and continue cultural practices different from those of the dominant culture. Paris states, "I question the usefulness of 'responsive' and 'relevant'—like the term 'tolerance' in multicultural education and training, neither term goes far enough." The substitution of *sustaining*, he says, requires that teachers' pedagogies "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence."[92]

Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy have been applied to libraries by a number of researchers in articles and conference presentations.[93] One useful focus of culturally sustaining pedagogy that other frameworks for library instruction frequently fail to address is the cultural dimensions of education. A major component in this approach is creating counter-narratives: personal stories that often run against what one is told. Counter-narratives can be an effective method for challenging deficit thinking. Librarian Kim Morrison, who teaches a course informed by asset-based pedagogy, describes the development of counter-narratives with her students through reflective journaling and a curriculum based on their experiences and interests. Her aim is "to build upon previous liberatory practices developed to promote transformation in the lives of those whose experience is marginalized."[94]

Pedagogies related to culturally sustaining pedagogy, such as asset-based teaching and funds of knowledge, offer additional inspiration. In writing about funds of knowl-

edge, which aims to acknowledge the wealth of experiences students bring to learning, Folk suggests that "one potential strategy to combat feelings of academic alienation and to help students join scholarly conversations is to incorporate their identities, as well as their prior knowledge, lived experiences and interests, into their academic work."[95] Funds of knowledge and other culturally sustaining approaches do not seek inclusion solely for the sake of academic engagement or retention, and instead, use students' knowledge for learning in relation to social issues.[96] Regardless of whether culturally sustaining pedagogy or another approach is adopted, the common threads are respecting students' knowledge and identifying ways for their understandings to inform not only their college experience but also their engagement with the world.

To draw attention to which types of knowledge are validated or marginalized in academe, librarians can question the limits of scholarly articles and the emphasis on Western scientific methods. These sources and methods are valued in much of higher education, but they have their own set of assumptions and limitations, and no knowledge system is inherently better than another. In describing a credit-bearing IL course that incorporates indigenous, working-class, and feminist ways of knowing, Christine Larson and Margaret Vaughan note that academic sources "need to be understood as probably not the complete story, but as a story mediated through another person." [97] Larson and Vaughan provide basket weaving as one example of a practice and object that is a source of indigenous knowledge, that tells generational stories through a basket's style and materials, and that differs from the knowledge expressed in academic sources.

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Conclusion

Cultural and political climates influence educational trends and practices. Deficit thinking reflects an individualistic approach to learning, in line with neoliberal conceptions of the self and education wherein personal responsibility and competition are paramount. Grit, growth mind-set, and associated theories represent a natural impulse; learners of all ages want to persevere in the face of challenges, and teachers want to facilitate such persistence. Qualities such as perseverance and a belief that one can increase one's intelligence are important, but they are far from sufficient, and they pose considerable risks in adopting deficit thinking. Instead, librarians should seek to help students understand the context of their lives and empower them to create change. How does an educator reject the "grit" movement but

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encourage effort and engagement, especially for our most vulnerable students? Honor effort and engagement as ends unto themselves, and not as means to other ends or as a magic elixir for overcoming societal inequities.

The only way to dismantle deficit thinking, an institutionalized worldview that is woven into our society, our colleges and universities, and our teaching, is piece by piece. First, we need to recognize deficit thinking when we see it. This can be difficult because such ideas are all around us and we are accustomed to them. It requires critically reflecting on how we are socialized into perpetuating these myths and how our identities are socially constructed and change over time. It is key to understand that differences—especially differences from us and how we learn, speak, or listen—are not deficits.

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For our teaching, we must discard the assumption that student achievement is a result of primarily effort and engagement. Learners' experiences, interests, and lives shape their perspectives on information and education, and these points of view must be made an integral part of teaching in libraries. The goals of critical information literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy are to build upon what students bring to the classroom. This means that we wish to learn from students. The best motivations of all, for teachers and students, are learning something new from or with other people and knowing your perspective is valued. Advocating for these opportunities within instruction and other areas of librarianship is imperative. Our work is not complete unless we seek and enact change that benefits the students who need it most.

Eamon Tewell is the head of research support and outreach at Columbia University Libraries in New York City; he may be reached by e-mail at:eamon.tewell@columbia.edu.

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