2. Professional Identity in the Library

A Case Study of Youth Services Professionals in an Urban Public Library System

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Abstract: Public libraries have historically been seen as warehouses for resources with library staff to help search. This is reflected in formal library education, which emphasizes organizing and searching skills. However, libraries have evolved to become community spaces that house makerspaces, social groups, music events, and job fairs. Libraries meet the needs of their communities as spaces for socializing, exploring, and learning. Library staff are at the crux of the tension between an old model of quiet individual learning and the new model of social and collaborative learning. This case study attempts to understand how this tension plays out in an urban library system. We interviewed 16 youth services library staff as well as 2 administrative supervisors using a new, meme-based tool for eliciting conversation around these tensions. Library staff feel pressure from the community to provide access to electronic resources while keeping youth quiet and pressure from the library to meet externally defined goals such as workforce readiness and academic proficiency. At the same time, the staff see inherent value in connecting with and building relationships with youth. The resulting tension is associated with feelings of being overwhelmed, overworked, and burned out. Looking forward, it seems that public libraries such as this could benefit from a facilitated learning model that values relationships as part of the collaborative and active learning process. Focusing on relationships as the crux of the work may help alleviate some tensions that staff experience.

Literature Review

American public libraries have been cultural fixtures since Benjamin Franklin opened the first one in 1833 (Brady & Abbott, 2015). Though rarely considered part of the educational system, they have evolved from membership-based, privately funded reading rooms (Brady & Abbott, 2015) to dynamic spaces for lifelong learning (Willett, 2016), advocacy, and social justice (American Library Association, 2017). The combination of steady cultural support and flexible services make public libraries some of the best, most responsive spaces for out-of-school learning.

Public libraries, in general, are moving away from an old model of information gatekeeper to a new model of education, community engagement, and facilitation (Lankes, 2011). This is illustrated by the introduction of library learning centers and makerspaces, which are spaces for hands-on STEM exploration. In turn, the job of librarians, especially youth services librarians, has changed from information organization and retrieval to informal education and facilitation. Interestingly, the American Library Association requirements for formal library education have not evolved as quickly as the services (American Library Association, 2015). Public library staff are neither trained nor recognized as youth workers but they are similar in many ways. Youth services staff face all of the same issues as youth workers: low pay, part-time hours, isolated training, and lack of legitimization (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Not only that, but public libraries provide many features of positive development, including psychological safety, structure, supportive adults, opportunities for belonging and skill building, and community engagement (Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005). The public libraries of today strive to support all youth in formal and informal programming. Like other youth workers, they create safe spaces for young people to learn, socialize, and connect with each other.

Youth service librarians tend to be trained to be resource providers—they connect youth with information, people, organizations, or other resources. This is especially true in formal Library Science programs. Recently, the vision of

youth librarians has changed: "Libraries used to be grocery stores. Now we need to be kitchens" (Braun, Hartman, Hughes-Hassell, Kumasi, & Yoke, 2014, p. 4). Competencies and trainings have encouraged librarians to learn to use and connect people with tools that they can leverage to pursue their own interests (Braun, Cooke, Lyons, Ryan, & Yoke, 2018). This kind of interest-based programming and connected learning requires getting to know youth and communities very well. However, facilitation and teaching are missing from the expectations and competencies.

State and national agencies regularly publish competencies for youth services library staff. *The Future of Library Services for and With Teens: A Call to Action* outlines a new direction for teen services (Braun et al., 2014). This policy document calls for teen services staff to be facilitators, educators, connectors, and partners. One of the goals is explained as "to change the lives of teens and provide them with a brighter future" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 31). This document very clearly encourages library staff to connect with teens and help facilitate their learning. It is interesting that they describe the historical audience as "teens who are readers and users of the physical school or public library space, especially teens who use the library for homework and leisure reading" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 15), which reflects the view that the library is about "stuff." This description calls to mind an image of a library that provides a quiet space and books, but not much more. In contrast, the vision for the future audience is "teens who view the school or public library as a community space" (Braun et al., 2014, p. 15). This is a very different vision for the space. Community spaces rely heavily on staff to create an open and inviting space. They have tools, but their purpose is more complex than simply providing books and a quiet space to read.

Theoretical Frame

Professional identity is an important part of an employee's identity. Some people may identify strongly with their occupation and/or organization and some may not. Professional identity is affected by social structures, economic opportunities, expectations, relationships, and salience of the work (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). If an organization meshes with the other facets of an individual's identity, the organization can provide valuable motivational factors. If, however, the organization clashes with the identity of the employee, this can create stress and lack of loyalty (Haslam & Ellemers, 2011). Identification with the organization can indicate that the employee sees it as a key element of their identity. When people are in a place to make occupational choices, their motivational tendencies can affect the way that they see their work. Those who are intrinsically motivated can see their work as a calling or a career while those who are extrinsically motivated tend to see their work as a set of tasks or as a way to move up in society (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). It is likely that libraries attract both types of people. Intrinsically motivated people look beyond the traditionally low library salaries and see their work as a way to help society at large while extrinsically motivated people see their work as a means to a paycheck or to gain skills for future employment.

Youth services are an example of library services that take an open-system perspective (R. W. Scott & Davis, 2007). Similar to those described in Lounsbury and Pollack (2016), the services of libraries have gone from being isolated and unidirectional information centers to spaces for learning and exploration. The environment places pressure on public libraries, especially in the case of young people. Stakeholders include politicians, parents, caretakers, funders, and the teens themselves. Librarians have tried to accommodate this by addressing many aspects of the larger field of Youth Services (W. R. Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, Newman, & McLaughlin, 2006). Library services have been repackaged to meet the pressures of the larger educational field in an effort to normalize library programming (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2016).

Method

The library system in this case study has 17 branch locations within a medium-sized Rust Belt city in the United States. Using typical case sampling (see Patton, 2014), we engaged 17 youth services staff (eight Teen Services, five Children's Services, and four both) from 14 branches in the library system. All staff were full time except one, but her data were included because she had substantial experience in the position and could speak to the research questions. Ten of the participants held a master's in Library Science degree. Two of the participants had outreach responsibilities that required travel to organizations within the community. The newest member of the staff had been there only one year and the most senior had been working for the library system for 17 years. Most of the participants had been working in the library system between two and six years. In addition, the Teen Services coordinator was interviewed twice to gain organizational insight. All interviews took place between Fall 2017 and Fall 2018. All participant were given a $20 gift card as thanks for their participation.

Each participant was interviewed using a semistructured interview protocol that took approximately 60 minutes. Interview topics included participants' education, training, experience, tenure at the library system, and the types of work they do with youth. Interviews included a meme-based activity, an exercise that required the participant to describe his or her work from the perspectives of various stakeholders. This exercise, modeled after a popular Internet meme, served as an elicitation device for the interview and also produced an artifact to analyze. After seeing an example from another field (teaching), participants were encouraged to draw or write their responses. The activity afforded contrasting perspectives to emerge in the library staff's description of their work as informal educators.

Analysis

For the purposes of this analysis, we focused on five questions from the interview prompts: What does the community think you do? What do library patrons think you do? What do you think you do? What do you actually do? Do you think of yourself as an educator? We analyzed the artifacts produced in the meme exercise in tandem with interviewer notes and interview transcripts. We used Dedoose mixed-methods analysis software to identify emergent codes. Two authors reviewed and agreed on all codes before proceeding to analysis.

The emergent themes in the analysis were: books, resources, quiet, behavior management, relationship with youth, technology support, and fun. These themes were collapsed into two large categories that came up in repeatedly in the interviews: relationships and resources. In addition, staff described the expectation that the library should be silent and the organizational work they needed to do. The following are the major themes that emerged from the data:

- Relationship Based—Working relationships with teens and patrons, mentoring, creating a safe space, youth engagement;
- Silent—Quiet, reads books all day, behavior management, babysitter, obsolete;
- Resource Based—Organizing, finding and recommending books, fixing computers and equipment, using new digital tools, answering questions;
- Organization Based—Management, committee work, paperwork, reports;
- Burnout—Multitask, overwhelmed, doing everything.

Findings

Expectations from the community and patrons seemed to fall squarely into the Silent and Resource-Based themes. Participants felt pressure to be closely tied to resources and to maintain a quiet and on-demand presence. This was a source of frustration when those expectations were also placed on the youth who were using the space. Of the 17 respondents, 9 stated that the community thought that they were silent and 14 stated that the community thought of them as resource based. None of the participants mentioned relationships when describing what the community thought they did.

The library staff expressed strong feelings about the expectations from the community. The overwhelming response was that the library was expected to be quiet, but the reasons for this quiet were varied. Staff explained that the community saw them as "doing book things" but also as "providing access." This theme of providing resources on demand was consistent throughout the interviews. Along with the expectation of resources was the assumption that libraries were disappearing with the advent of the Internet. One of the most interesting themes was that the community expected library staff to keep kids quiet. "They don't want to deal with the kids" but they expect them to be quiet and out of the way. This misunderstanding of youth services and of youth in general was a source of frustration for staff.

Library staff expressed a slightly different expectation from actual library patrons. Staff thought that they were expected to provide resources for everything from books to computer support and digital media assistance. All 17 participants stated that library patrons thought they were resource based. Only two said that they thought library patrons thought of them as engaging in relationship work. One staff member explained that young people saw him as "Walmart! On-demand fun." There was more talk of connection and relationships in reference to people who used the library. One respondent explained that library patrons saw him as a "cross between a postal carrier and a bartender." He listened to patrons' stories, heard their complaints, and delivered resources. While relationships were not placed at the center of these expectations, they were more present than with those in the general community.

In contrast, responses to "What I think I do" reflected more relationship-based work. Thirteen of the participants thought that they engaged in relationship-based work. Ten participants said that they did resource-based work. Staff see themselves as mentors and as facilitators of active, engaged learning and collaboration as well as resource brokers. Library staff consistently described their jobs in terms of relationships and learning. One staff member described her job as being a "quiet catalyst. And when the teens open up, it's like they tell you all kinds of things about their lives. And then some of those relationships, they just know that somebody cares." One staff member's view of his job was as amplifying youth voice. Another participant wanted to support teens and change the world in the process. Staff really focused on connecting with and learning about the youth in the community. There was some mention of resources, but they were mainly couched in the desire to enhance the experience of youth rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge.

The question about "What I actually do" yielded mixed responses. Fourteen of the respondents described their work as research based and only five described their work as relationship based. Many of the staff stated that they did everything, multitasked, balanced priorities, and five of them were coded as burned out. One staff member explained that she was "running everywhere all the time; putting out fires." The emotion attached to their responses reflected a sense of being completely overwhelmed.

Interviewees' responses to whether or not they identified as educators were mixed. Thirteen responded affirmatively, but several struggled with the semantics. Eight of the participants qualified their responses. One staff member explained that she felt "more social worker than educator, but definitely educator. … I would say the social worker part of you is like working on the more base needs whereas an educator is the next step up." Staff struggled with the idea that relationships and education could coexist in their position.

In order to better understand the context of this library system, we interviewed the Teen Services coordinator, who, along with the Children's Service coordinator, provides onboard training and mentorship to youth services staff in all 18 branches. She described the strategic plan that has been in place for the last five years. The emphasis is on "interest-based learning," which involves encouraging young people to pursue interests and to acquire skills and knowledge to reach mastery, feel independent, and gain career skills. Under this plan, the library is to be a space for informal learning for anyone at any time. The plan emphasizes cultivation of interests through introduction of tools and resources such as sewing machines, 3D printers, robotics, and cameras. These activities are not necessarily directly tied to programs but are instead available at any time for use and skill improvement through a formal badge system. Staff award badges for mastery and often give additional privileges such as unsupervised tool use and the ability to take equipment home. There is an emphasis on youth services staff being mentors to youth, but this mentorship seems very much tied to interest and skill development. The emphasis is less on social-emotional skills and more on "practical" skill acquisition. The professional development available to youth services staff revolves around skill building. This institutional view is a mix of both the individualistic and facilitated models of learning.

Discussion

This paper is a case study of one urban library system. It is clear that the staff are interested in connecting with the youth in their communities, but it is unclear how the library system supports such work. What is clear is that there is a tension between expectations and the actual work done in the library.

Outside stakeholders, as represented by the community, seem to disregard the work in the library and to expect an old-fashioned quiet space full of books. This is in stark contrast with the multitasking and burnout of the actual work done in the library. In the context of professional identity theory (Brown, 2015), there seems to be a friction between expectations, workload, and identity that is causing tension and burnout.

The tool used in this study contrasted several perspectives/stakeholders' idea of library work. The community is the furthest from the actual work so it follows that its perspective would be the most old fashioned and obsolete. Library staff feel that they are disregarded and even disrespected by this group. Unfortunately, the community is a stakeholder in a public library and can put pressure and expectations on the work done. Library patrons, those who use the library, are somewhat closer to the library work but the staff still felt that they saw their work as incomplete. Respondents described patrons as seeing their work as book and resource based. Thus, the public is not seeing the actual complex work of the library. Again, patrons are stakeholders and can put enormous pressure on the work that is done in their community.

The question about "What do you think you do" seems to be the most idealistic of all the prompts. It may or may not be as realistic as "What the library patrons think I do." Interestingly, this prompt yielded the most discussion of relationships, connecting with youth, and creating safe spaces, which is exactly what library policy documents are supporting (Braun et al., 2014).

The "What do you actually do" prompt seemed to reflect that staff are juggling the expectations of stakeholders and their own wishes for their job. This friction may be leading to the burnout that is reflected in their responses. Those staff members whose identities are closely tied to their work may be experiencing discord because their actual work is quite different from their idealized job. It seems that even when staff are not multitasking, they are sacrificing the ideal part of their job in favor of resource brokering and organizational work.

Interestingly, many of the participants thought of themselves as educators, at least in part. Many of them qualified their educator identities with their lack of formal education and curriculum experience. This may be a reflection of the

tension between traditional book-based education and the more informal relationship-based work that is reflected in our findings.

When we put together our findings with the interview with the Teen Services coordinator, the tension becomes even clearer. The library system is very focused on tools and on learning to use new technology. While there is a new interest in training staff to be mentors, those trainings seem to fall to the side when there are resources to learn about, tools to master, and procedures to follow.

Conclusion

Library staff, especially those who work with youth, are facing a strong shift in expectations and pressures in their work. Library work is traditionally resource based and the social expectations reflect an old-fashioned view of a book-based library. Unfortunately, there seems to be an assumption that libraries have not kept up with technology and are therefore obsolete. This pressure to meet resource needs of the community flies in the face of staff job expectations as well as the policy recommendations put forth by professional organizations.

The resource- and relationship-based work that library staff describe is very similar to that which is done in afterschool programs. There is tremendous pressure to prepare youth for the workforce, to please local and state government expectations, and to appease grantors interested in educational initiatives such as literacy and STEM. These educational goals create an environment focused on goals and outcomes and pulls attention away from relationships and toward the resources available in the library. As part of the field of informal educators, library staff feel pressures to be everything to everyone. Unfortunately, like afterschool workers, they are trained neither to facilitate learning nor to balance the expectations of disparate stakeholders.

In order to ease the tension demonstrated in this case study, we recommend stronger training programs to help library staff learn to facilitate learning and incorporate relationship building into their educational outcomes. This relationship-based work will enhance the experience for the youth and help them learn and grow (Li & Julian, 2012). Focusing on relationships could help staff align their work with their expectations and feel more at ease with their work.

This study is reflective of only one well-resourced library system. It is concerning, though, because less well-resourced systems may struggle even more with less training and fewer staff. Local training and support may not be enough to help staff evolve along with library services. State and national organizations may need to step in.

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