Staff Development in North Carolina's Public Libraries: The Paraprofessional Perspective

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The human resource development system operating in North Carolina's public libraries appears to place tremendous responsibility on the employee. In fact, it appears that employees must motivate themselves, request permission to participate in staff development, assist in identifying the need for particular activities, and assume responsibility for implementing what they have learned with minimum support from their organization.

The purpose of this article is to explore the experiences of paraprofessionals in North Carolina's public libraries with staff development. It builds on a previous study which explored the staff development efforts of North Carolina's public libraries from the perspective of directors. By comparing the results of these two studies, a picture of the state's public library training infrastructure is developed. By "training infrastructure," I mean the human resource development system that is operating in the state. This system consists of the strategies and techniques used to develop North Carolina public library staff.

This article consists of two main parts. The first part is a brief review of the directors' perspective. The second part discusses the paraprofessionals' perspective including their experiences with: (1) orientation, (2) on-the-job training, and (3) access to continuing education opportunities outside the library.

Director's Perspective

"Staff Development in North Carolina's Public Libraries: Needs, Opportunities, and Commitment," reported on a survey of North Carolina's public library directors.[1] It sought to determine the present state of staff development in the state's public libraries. Several of its findings have direct bearing on the current study. These include responsibilities for (a) staff development, (b) staff

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development strategies, (c) needs assessment, (d) evaluation, and (e) follow-up.

In the area of responsibility for staff development programs, several issues were explored. These consisted of determining who has responsibility
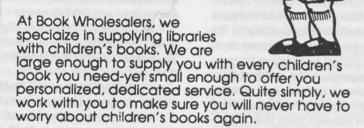
- for the provision of staff development,
- for planning staff development,
- for participating in staff development, and
- for motivating individuals to participate in staff development.

The vast majority of public library directors encouraged all levels of staff to participate in staff development because of the belief that the library has a responsibility for providing staff development opportunities. Public library directors feel that the library staff has the responsibility for participating in staff development and for seeking it. This means that, *from the director's perspective*, it is the employees' responsibility to initiate the request for staff development.

This placing of responsibility on the employee is further reinforced by the factors used by library directors to determine whether or not an individual will be allowed to participate in a staff development activity. The two top factors used by public library directors to determine this were (1) the interest and potential of the learner and (2) the expression of need by the potential learner. The directors rely heavily on "intrinsic motivators" for participation in staff development. The two most commonly used motivators were esteem and "credit" in performance review. Note, however, that "intrinsic motivators" work only if employees desire the director's esteem and praise.

Directors employ a variety of strategies for meeting the staff development needs of their employees. The two most popular are workshops and on-the-job training. The public library director's study did not discuss employee orientation as part of staff development. However, the importance off employee orientation cannot be underestimated, especially when discussing the paraprofessional population. Also only fifty percent of

the directors identified coaching as a staff development strategy currently in use in their libraries. Coaching in a library setting would consist of observing a trainee use a new skill in the work environment and then providing feedback on the spot about what was done successfully and what could be improved.

Before we examine these findings from the paraprofessional perspective, however, we need to define the paraprofessional population which participated in this study.

Study Population

This study focused on paraprofessionals working in North Carolina public libraries. In order to obtain a sample of North Carolina paraprofessionals the membership list of the North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association, a roundtable of the North Carolina Library Association, was used. All members of this roundtable received a mailing which consisted of a flyer advertising the dates, locations, and times of focus groups and a cover letter explaining the purpose of these focus groups. While participation in the groups was not limited to members of the North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association, a large number were members. (Membership in the North Carolina Library Paraprofessional Association is open to anyone working in or interested in libraries. In order to join the roundtable, however, one must also join the North Carolina Library Association.)

The individuals involved in this study have demonstrated that they are very motivated and personally committed to their own growth and development. Given that only a small percentage of paraprofessionals join the roundtable we can assume that this study's population is very much more willing to assume responsibility for participating in and initiating requests for staff development than the paraprofessional population as a whole.

Twenty-five public library paraprofessionals, all female, make up the population. They range in age from 29 to 59 years with a median age of 42.8 years. In terms of library experience, they have between 2.67 to 29 years of library experience with a median of 10.5 years of library experience and have spent between 0.75 and 20 years in their present job classifications, with a median of 4.4 years in their present classifications. Their educational achievements range from high school graduation only to pursuit of the Master of Library Science degree (high school graduate only, ten percent, some college but no degree, twenty-five percent; an associate's degree, thirty percent; a

bachelor's degree, thirty-five percent). In terms of participation in formal library science coursework, seventy-three percent had never participated in formal coursework at any level, and nine percent had participated in formal coursework at the community college, nine percent at undergraduate and nine percent at graduate levels. Fifteen percent indicated that they were interested in pursuing the Master of Library Science degree, seventy percent indicated that they were not, ten percent were currently enrolled, and five percent indicated that they might pursue the master's at a later date. Ninety percent of study participants indicated participation in library related workshops.

The individuals involved in this study come from all sizes and types of public libraries. Municipal libraries, regional library systems, as well as county systems are represented in this study.

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Study participants are currently working in both branch library and main library settings. Outreach settings are also represented by a participant who has responsibility for her library's bookmobile service. Staff size for the employing institutions of study participants ranges from 1.5 to 234 full-time equivalents, with from 0-60 professionals and from 1.5 to 164 paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessional Perspective

Focus group meetings were held to determine the staff development experiences of paraprofessionals in North Carolina's public libraries; these followed the techniques and strategies outlined in "Educational Needs Assessment: Group Interview Technique," by Suzanne Mahmoodi and others.[2] Each focus group lasted approximately three hours and concentrated on the continuing education needs and concerns of the group members. Each group was asked to discuss experiences in orientation, on-the-job training, and access to continuing education activities outside the library. Each group had an individual who served as a recorder and took notes. The following discussion is based on examination of the reports submitted by these three individuals as well as my own notes.

Orientation

In her book, *Effective On-the-Job Training*, Sheila Creth provides an orientation checklist. This checklist includes the working conditions that supervisors should cover with a new employee. Topics covered on the checklist include job duties, physical surroundings, hours of work, leave, compensation, evaluation, benefits, and employee rights and responsibilities.[3] This checklist is intended to be used by a supervisor in a one-on-one orientation session. Another type of orientation program is provided by the Milwaukee Public Library (MPL). In its Human Resource Development Program Procedure Manual the following description of MPL's orientation program is provided:

A formal orientation program to the Milwaukee Public Library System and Milwaukee County Federated Library System is offered by-monthly to all new library staff members. Speakers include the City Librarian, Deputy City Librarian, Assistant City Librarian for Central Library, the Personnel Officer, and Head of Circulation. Information provided includes the role of libraries in society, current and future library trends on the local and national level, the mission of MPL and its long range goals, and the role staff members play in meeting the library's mission and goals. Participants are given an overview of the organization of the Milwaukee Public Library System and the Milwaukee County Federated Library System, including governance and financial support. Speakers and a slide show presentation provide information on the operations and service of the Central Library and Extension Services Bureau. The overriding message conveyed is that the person's job is important to the successful operation of the library. Participants also have an opportunity to review written orientation materials they received when they began employment and to learn of the services provided by the Library Personnel Office.[4]

These two strategies demonstrate the breadth of strategies that can be used in library orientation programs. Based on participants' comments, it is apparent that a wide range orientation strategies are in use in North Carolina's public libraries. The orientation experiences of study participants varied widely. In some libraries, orientation receives formal, structured attention. In others, orientation consists of a walk through the library with a co-worker. In discussing their orientation experiences, the paraprofessionals found orientation to be frequently sketchy and overwhelming in some cases; largely self-instructional, consisting mostly of information about salary and benefits; and, as it existed in most circumstances, largely ineffective and not worthwhile. Participants stated that orientation would be improved and more useful if it was spread out over more than one day and if there were provisions for follow-up

meetings where new questions could be explored and discussed.

Orientation is especially important for para-professional staff since most have not had the benefit of formal library education courses that would provide them with an overview of librarianship, the profession's mission, and specifically the mission of the library in which they are about to work. When asked what type of information a structured orientation program should contain, participants stated that the library's mission statement, how this statement relates to the community, salary and benefits, the individual's job description and its relationship to the larger organization, and the system's procedures should be included. Several stated that their library had improved its orientation program since they began working. They also stated that, whenever significant changes occur either in the library's mission or in the content of the orientation program, all library employees, not just new employees, should be informed.

On-the-Job Training

The second item explored in this study is on-the-job training. Creth states that "The primary objective of job training is to bring about a change — an increase in knowledge, the acquisition of a skill, or the development of confidence and good judgment. Job training is not successful unless the person can do something new or different or demonstrate a change in behavior."[5] For paraprofessionals most training is on-the-job training. Therefore, it is vitally important that on-the-job training be a primary focus of anyone responsible for the training and development of paraprofessionals. On-the-job training is frequently an informal process, with no evaluation, little standardization, and less follow-up. Participants felt that, in most cases, they had to initiate the request for on-the-job training, and they would like to see management assume a more active role. The participants seem to feel that they are largely responsible for their own training, and several individuals refer to the self-directed nature of their learning on the job.

Two specific examples may help to illuminate the range of on-the-job experiences discussed by study participants. In one case a new employee received her training in shelving from a co-worker. At no point in this process did her supervisor check on her training or on her performance. A year later, this employee viewed a film that discussed shelving and learned on her own she had been shelving books incorrectly. In another case, an employee had received both a promotion and a

transfer to another department. Her new responsibilities included assisting library patrons in doing in-depth research. She stated that in her new position library personnel communicated very clearly what was expected of her, gave her materials to study, and stated that they were there for her if she needed help. She further stated that she appreciated not only the clear direction and expectation communicated by her supervisor, but also the consideration given to her learning style. This individual preferred to learn independently and seek assistance when she needed it. The library personnel involved in her training understood this and encouraged her to learn in the way she learned best.

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Participants also felt that follow-up for on-the-job training needed improvement. Several participants stated that after training, they received little or no reinforcement or evaluation. The importance of follow-up has been identified and discussed in "Improving Inservice Training: The Message of Research," by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers.[6] In their review of over two hundred investigations on training, Joyce and Showers discovered that in order for inservice training to be effective it must include exposure to theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and experience in using new skills in the setting for which the training was designed. Joyce and Showers also discuss the concept of coaching.

Coaching was a vital part of the State of Maryland's very successful reference training program. In Maryland libraries where staff received this training, reference accuracy increased from fifty-five to seventy-seven percent. In facilities where trainees received intensive peer coaching followed by intermittent coaching and supervisory support, reference accuracy increased to ninety-five percent.[7] If, as Creth states, the purpose of training is to bring about a change in performance, on-the-job training in the state's public libraries must make marked improvements in the area of follow-up and reinforcement if it is to be effective. Failure to do so will only result in a greatly reduced return on the library's investment of time, energy, and money in on-the-job training.

Access to Outside Training

The vast majority of public libraries in North Carolina uses a combination of in-house and external resources for meeting the training and staff development needs of their staffs. If the state's libraries are committed to the provision of staff development opportunities for all staff, then paraprofessionals must have access to workshop opportunities that are conducted outside of the libraries in which they are employed. Participants were asked to discuss their access to outside training.

In general, they stated that they were allowed to attend workshops if they initiated the request. Most learned about workshop offerings on their own and rarely received suggestions for workshop attendance from their supervisors. In addition, most found that it was frequently difficult to learn about workshops in a timely manner since the majority of information about workshop offerings was contained in literature that was routed through the system. Several stated that since they had joined the North Carolina Paraprofessional Association, they had begun receiving their own copies of these materials. This service had greatly increased their access to information about what workshops were available.

Again, most participants stated that there was little or no follow-up as a result of participation in a workshop or staff development activity. While some were required to make written or oral reports about what they had learned, most came back from a workshop with no responsibility to communicate or implement what they had learned. In fact, one participant stated that she frequently came back to work all "pumped up" with what she had learned and was ready to implement some of that knowledge in the workplace, but no one seemed interested in what she had learned. As a result, she also felt that many of the good ideas for improving library service were never implemented.

This lack of follow-up is not limited to the public libraries of North Carolina. Mary Broad, in her article, "Management Action to Support Transfer of Training," asked 105 American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) non-student chapter presidents to review 74 actions management could take to support the transfer of training to the job.[8] The ASTD chapter presidents rated seventy-one (ninety-six percent) of the behaviors as being important for the transfer of training to the workplace. This group also stated that while ninety-six percent of these behaviors were important, they had only actually observed forty-nine percent of them in use in practice.

A further finding of Broad's study is the importance of the supervisor in the transfer of training. Of the seventy-four behaviors listed by Broad, sixty (eighty-one percent) were listed as being the responsibility of the supervisor. The specific supervisor behaviors listed by Broad in the area of follow-up include:

- Involves trainees in work-related decisions based on new training
- Has regular individual conferences with trainees back on the job
- Approves regular meetings of groups of trainees to discuss use of new behaviors
- Informs trainee of regularly increased expectations for levels of job performance
- Gives positive reinforcement for desired trainee performance
- Regularly announces data on trainee's use of new behaviors
- Requests reports from trainees on new skills, knowledge on job
- Arranges later follow-up workshop for trainee reports on projects, action plans
- Provides occasional practice sessions for important but seldom used skills
- Sends copies of training proceedings and/or evaluations to trainees
- Circulates newsletter among trainees to share ideas, actions back on job[9]

Broad further states that not all of these behaviors are intended for use in all situations. They are listed here merely to provide readers with an overview of the wide range of behaviors that support the transfer of training to the workplace.

Conclusion

Both public library directors and public library paraprofessionals seem to agree that each has some responsibility for staff development. Both also agree on their respective roles. Directors feel they have a responsibility to provide staff development when it is requested by staff; paraprofessionals feel they get staff development opportunities if they request them. Based on this study, this system appears to have two basic flaws.

First of all, self-initiation places a tremendous responsibility on the employee. As pointed out, the participants in this study are unusually highly motivated. These individuals were clear about their preference for more management involvement in their staff development. Specifically these individuals want management to discuss potential staff development opportunities with them, assist them in setting learning objectives, consult with them about what was learned, and support them in implementing their new learning on the job. If these self-starters feel the need for more support from their managers, what must individuals who lack this initiative feel? The consequences, for the vast majority of paraprofessionals, of this component of the public library training infrastructure is that the system denies access to staff development. It denies access by forcing the individuals with the least power in our libraries to ask individuals with the most power for something for themselves.

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Secondly, it appears that the role played by supervisors in staff development needs to be strengthened. On several occasions participants stated that they received little guidance or follow-up, but both Creth and Broad state that these responsibilities belong to library managers and supervisors. Managers and supervisors must assess their perceptions about their role and their skills in the area of human resource development. Failure to do this and to assume an active role in assisting the growth and development of all staff members will only result in libraries that are ill prepared for what is becoming an increasingly gloomy future.

There is no question that the state's paraprofessionals are highly motivated to pursue staff development activities. In fact, as a group they expressed stronger motivations for continuing education than did professionals.[10] This same highly motivated group has requested the assistance and support of management in their continued growth and development. Thus, the adoption by management of a more consultative relationship with its paraprofessional staff in the area of staff development would result in a stronger training infrastructure for North Carolina's public libraries.

References

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