

# Impact, Advocacy, and Professional Development

*An Exploration of Storytime Assessment in Washington State*

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We have provided this condensed executive summary of the white paper, *Impact, Advocacy, and Professional Development*, that reports the findings of the exploration into the current state of storytime assessment in Washington State<sup>1</sup>. For additional information on our findings and the content included in this executive summary, please see the full white paper at:

<http://views2.ischool.uw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Impact-Advocacy-and-Professional-Development.pdf>

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<sup>1</sup> This exploration was done as the final piece of Project VIEWS2, which was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

## **Executive Summary**

Project VIEWS2 provided groundbreaking evidence that demonstrated: 1) storytimes make a difference in children’s literacy behaviors; 2) there is a correlation between early literacy content offered by the librarian and what can be observed in the children who attend in terms of early literacy behaviors; and 3) that an intentional focus on early literacy in storytime planning results in an increased level of observable early literacy indicators in the children who attend. Building on this foundational work, we completed a qualitative exploration of the landscape of storytime assessment, using interviews with storytime providers and library administrators, to understand what kinds of processes are taking place, what are the perceived benefits and challenges to both assessment as a broad concept and to the processes themselves, and what sorts of tools are being developed to perform these assessments.

Broadly speaking, our findings are that assessment is still a largely emergent, unregulated and highly complex process, with much of the most fruitful interactions taking place in informal conversations and interactions. As we learned through our interviews, it seems there is no single way to measure, understand, and advocate for the importance of storytimes and programming for young children in general. Rather, it is important to consider particular communities, specific library goals, and the goals of the library administrators and storytime providers. In addition, we found that the processes that are in place are rarely static—they seem to be frequently shifting and evolving, such that even during the time we were interviewing some of the participants, they weren’t exactly sure of the current process within their library or library system. Furthermore, some interviewees shied away from the term “assessment” altogether.

From the interviews we identified four main types of storytime assessment, each containing a wide variation in terms of design and implementation.

- Self-reflection
- Peer mentoring or coaching
- Parent/caregiver feedback
- Administrative/supervisor feedback

We also found that a variety of tools, formal and informal, are being used to support each of these types. We defined formal tools as those created specifically for use with the assessment process. Formal tools were more frequently used to support outward-facing assessment. Informal tools are tools being used for assessment but not specifically created for that purpose. Informal tools were more frequently used to support less-structured assessment practices.

### **Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection is perhaps one of the hardest types to characterize because of its inherently personal, informal, and customized nature. In our interviews with practitioners, we found that self-reflection was one of the most common kinds of assessment that seemed to have value in

professional development and personal improvement. *“Self assessment is key,”* one storytime provider told us, *“... to making improvement and also key to not getting stuck in a rut.”* It is a primarily practitioner-focused, inward-facing type of assessment that seems to occur along a spectrum, which we have loosely categorized into three types:

- an unstructured, spontaneous way in which a storytime provider reflects on part of the storytime or storytime as a whole; or
- an intentional, unstructured way in which a storytime provider reflects on part of or the entire storytime; or
- an intentional structured way in which storytime providers keep notes on how things went, what went well, what needs more work, or how the children reacted to a particular storytime element.

Several storytime providers reported reflecting on their storytime in a casual, spontaneous, and unstructured manner. Many times this reflection included a quick check against a storytime resource, such as storytime blogs, books, or internal guidelines, to ensure they were aligning with basic storytime practice. *“There are a couple of books that I’ve been using, the books that ALA publishes about storytimes. I’ve read through those, to see if I am using similar techniques.”*

Some storytime providers reflect on their storytimes in a broader, perhaps unstructured way, without a specific tool or set of criteria but rather a general impression that can influence future practice. For instance, one storytime provider shared, *“I try to look at each storytime and see what I liked about it, what I want to do again, what I could change up and do a variation on so it’s an ongoing thing and it’s the way I keep my storytimes fresh.... It’s not perfect because...it’s my own internal assessment.... But I think I do a pretty good job of assessing it.”*

Other storytime providers have a systematic way in which they reflect upon their practice. For instance, one interviewee said, *“At the end of the eight or ten week storytime session, I go through everything I used and think about, ‘Okay, did this work, did this not work?’ I’m more strategic about ‘We had this skill but not this other skill or this is something I didn’t do at all so how could I try improving that in the next storytime session.’”*

Providers are using a wide and extremely diverse range of tools for self-reflection. Storytime providers reported using many informal tools to support their self-reflective practices, essentially using what worked best for them and their practice. Some of the more common types of tools used for self-reflection are:

- Observations of children/observation notes
- External storytime blogs
- Personal storytime blogs
- Monthly report
- Storytime attendance statistics

- VIEWS2 tools

### **Peer-Mentoring**

During the interviews we heard many examples of how storytime providers and the peers are working together to provide and receive feedback in the assessment process. While these processes looked different library to library, they did have some similarities that enabled us to group together into broader types of peer assessment. The broad approaches that we developed based on the interview data are:

- Structured peer coaching;
- Informal peer discussions; and
- New-hire mentoring.

In some cases there is an established structured peer coaching or mentoring process that storytime providers follow. One provider described the process in her library as follows:

*“My supervisor just started having myself and my coworker do assessment of each other. It’s not like a formal district thing but, for example, my coworker does toddler storytime and I do preschool storytime and we’re each assigned to observe and take notes on each other’s storytimes. And then we meet with each other one-on-one and just talk about what we observed and things we thought we could add or adjust about each other’s storytimes.”*

Others spoke of how their peer process can be informal and even spontaneous. *“I always try to evaluate how any given storytime has gone,” one storytime provider told us. “I’m lucky to have another children’s librarian at my library and we do talk about, you know, ‘Hey, I really, really liked it when I did such and such today’ and we can compare notes that way.”* Several interviewees showed an interest in trying to make peer observation and feedback more frequent and intentional.

New employees may also have more opportunities to observe storytimes and be observed than veterans do. One administrator told us that storytime observations happen, *“on a very informal level... particularly for some of the newer staff that joined. They do sort of some shadowing so going out and seeing other programs... sort of shadow and observe and have a chance to talk in that way.”*

Different types of peer mentoring tools included:

- Checklist
- Worksheet/form
- Observation notes
- Informal/verbal feedback
- VIEWS2 tools

## **Parent/Caregiver**

In addition to self-reflection and peer mentoring as methods to assess storytimes, we also heard about several libraries/library systems that are turning to their parents and caregivers to understand the impact and success of their storytimes. *“Talking to parents during storytime is a huge way of assessing how I’m doing because if they’re happy, I know I’m doing a good job,”* said one storytime provider. Parent feedback seemed most often to take the form of:

- Spontaneous conversation
- Intentional methods for feedback

Storytime providers discussed encouraging parents and caregivers to come and talk to them and provide feedback, essentially soliciting the verbal assessment. *“After storytime I try to engage with parents to get a sense of how it’s going for them. And I try to make sure that they understand, you know, that they’re part of it and that I welcome their input and their comments.”*

Several storytime providers reported using intentional methods, such as surveys, with their parents and caregivers, which allowed them to solicit more targeted and specific feedback. *“Roughly once a year, we do a storytime program evaluation for the parents and caregivers that attend. It includes how they heard about storytime, the children and their ages, and then a little bit about whether they enjoyed the program, if it met their expectations, what they would like to see improved.”*

The common types of parent/caregiver feedback tools included:

- Surveys
- Informal/verbal conversations
- Social media

## **Administrative/Supervisor**

The final broad type of storytime assessment that emerged from the interviews was administrative assessment. Across a majority of the libraries interviewed, many administrators were reported to be involved in storytime assessment in one form or another. Similar to the other broad types of assessment, the ways that administrators were doing storytime assessment was fairly diverse from library to library. Administrator assessment most often took the form of:

- Annual observation/comments
- Annual performance review
- New-hire observation

Some administrators reported using observations and follow-up discussions with their (new and experienced) storytime providers as a way to provide them with feedback on their storytime practices to contribute to the development and growth of their storytimes.

Sometimes storytime observations, and assessment of the storytime, fed into the annual performance review of the storytime provider. One administrator reported, *“Branch managers are expected to include the review of storytimes as part of their annual performance review.”*

Administrators also reported being involved in the assessment of storytimes provided by newly hired storytime providers as part of a larger training program. In most cases the storytime assessment for new hires occurred via observations. *“So what I try to do is get them to observe a couple storytimes and then we plan a storytime together. I observe them and we talk about what went well, what left them uncomfortable, and what I can do to help shore up their skills.”*

The most common tools used to support administrator/supervisor assessment were:

- Checklists
- Forms
- Observation notes
- Verbal conversations

### **Benefits/Challenges**

Based on our interview data, it is clear that assessment—whether formal or informal/required or not—provides a variety of broad benefits and challenges. General beneficial themes include:

- Advocacy and impact;
- Dialogue within an organization;
- Professional development and training; and
- A community of practice for storytime providers.

Broadly speaking, the main challenges around assessment included:

- Time and staffing,
- Unclear communication; and
- Pushback and lack of buy-in.

### **Stakeholders Needs With Respect to Assessment**

We know from the various benefits and challenges both of assessment broadly and also of each individual type, that administrators and storytime providers have a variety of needs around the development and implementation of assessment of storytimes. Two main themes emerged in our analysis of the interviews:

- Time
- Communication

Throughout our interviews we heard both administrators and storytime providers lament a lack of time to develop and/or implement an assessment process. Many spoke of how much is already

expected of them and how little time they are given to complete existing tasks. Time to reflect, too, is an ongoing issue—reflect both as a form of assessment and as a way to understand whether assessment is beneficial or not to the practice of storytimes.

Communication goes hand in hand with time in terms of the needs administrators and storytime providers have regarding assessment. Among the benefits and challenges expressed by these stakeholders, pushback and buy-in as well as a greater understanding of the purpose and goal of assessment were frequently expressed. Stakeholders need to understand why assessment is being done, what is being assessed, and, in the case of storytime providers, what the assessment means for their own professional careers, as well as what it means for the communities they serve.

### **Suggestions for Practice**

Based on this preliminary study, we suggest that:

- 1) Libraries dedicate time to implementing thoughtful processes that enable both individual self-reflection and peer mentoring in an effort to support advocacy, demonstrate impact, and promote professional development through storytime assessment in public libraries.
- 2) Libraries develop a system of assessment that is grounded in improving practice, creating a safe space for sharing ideas and solving problems as a community of practice.
- 3) Library administrators and storytime providers engage in open communication about organizational and individual goals and situate assessment in that goal setting process.

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