

# Impact, Advocacy, and Professional Development

## *An Exploration of Storytime Assessment in Washington State*

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### SUMMARY

Project VIEWS2 research provided groundbreaking evidence that demonstrated: 1) storytimes make a difference in children's literacy behaviors; 2) there is a correlation between early literacy indicators offered by the librarian and observable early literacy indicators in the children who attend storytimes; 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 that work, we recently completed a qualitative exploration of storytime assessment in public libraries in Washington State to understand: a) what types of assessment are taking place; b) what are the perceived benefits and challenges both to assessment as a concept and to the individual types; c) what sorts of tools are being developed to assess storytimes; and d) what stakeholders need in terms of assessment. Broadly speaking, we found that assessment is still a largely emergent and unregulated process, with the most fruitful interactions taking place during informal conversations and interactions among storytime providers. There are a number of benefits: including ensuring quality and standards, advocacy, and demonstrating impact; as well as challenges: including pushback and lack of buy-in, time and staffing, and a lack of understanding of the importance of storytime among administrators. Based on this preliminary study, we suggest that libraries dedicate time to implementing thoughtful processes that enable both individual self-reflection and peer-based mentoring in an effort to support advocacy, demonstrate impact, and promote professional development through storytime assessment in public libraries.

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## Section 1: Introduction and background

This study<sup>1</sup> grew out of several discussions and interviews with librarians and administrators in the process of disseminating findings from Project VIEWS2. Project VIEWS2, funded in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, examined how to measure early literacy in public library storytimes for children. Researchers used tools that enabled both live and video observations and coding of both the storytime content and the children's behaviors. In all, 35 researchers attended 240 storytimes, observed 40 librarians and more than 1800 children, and coded more than 700 spreadsheets over the two years of data collection.

At the end of year one, the first round of data collection and analysis established a correlation between the presence of observable literacy indicators in the storytime content provided by the librarian and the presence of corresponding indicators in the children who attended.

Following an intervention during year two, a second round of data collection and analysis demonstrated that an intentional focus on interactive early literacy content in the planning and delivery of storytimes makes a difference in the early literacy skills of the children who attend.

### Why study assessment?

The groundbreaking results from Project VIEWS2 established a baseline of research for an area that has up to this point remained largely unstudied in a systematic fashion. Furthermore, during the presentation of these findings, we learned of two emerging trends:

1. Storytime assessment is either on the horizon or already in the works in many library systems across the country; and

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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.

2. Both providers and administrators viewed the VIEWS2 tools as potential instruments for assessment.

While the VIEWS2 research tools do enable users to measure early literacy skills in the storytime program and in the children who attend, we as researchers felt that it would be a misuse of these tools to simply pick them up and expect them to serve as checklists by which storytimes and the storytime providers could be evaluated, without a deeper understanding or communication of the purpose of the program and the providers' own goals for their practice. Furthermore, we wanted to better understand the need for and current practice of assessment, according to perceptions by stakeholders.

As a result, two areas of questions came to the surface:

1. Why should a library conduct an assessment of storytimes? Is there a need for such assessment? What are the goals of a library system and how does storytime fit within those goals? What are the goals of an administrator for the storytime provider and what are the storytime provider's own goals?
2. How might practices such as self-reflection and peer-mentoring figure into an assessment process for storytime? These are processes that grew out of the training provided to the librarians in VIEWS2, and we wanted to explore them further in terms of assessment.

Based on these questions and the need articulated within the community for a deeper understanding of assessment of storytimes in public libraries, we designed an exploratory study for the last year of Project VIEWS2 that would give us an initial view of the landscape of assessment and enable us to share these findings widely to further the discussion and inform future practices. We focused on the following broad question: *What is the current landscape in terms of assessment of public library storytimes in Washington State?*

## How we conducted our study

In early 2015, we interviewed 35 public library employees, including 12 library administrators and 23 storytime providers, about the assessment of library storytimes. Libraries were selected to participate from the more than 300 libraries that belong to Washington State's Early Learning Public Library Partnership (ELPLP). This partnership of 30 library systems across the state of Washington is vested in fully participating in the advancement of early learning in Washington State.

We also identified interview participants through emails to participants in earlier stages of the Project VIEWS research. Our participants represented small, medium, and large library systems across the state of Washington and the administrators ranged from supervisors/coordinators to directors. Interviewees were sent a consent form that explained the study and the potential risks along with a brief screening survey. Interviews were conducted via phone or Skype and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Most interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

During the interviews, we asked participants about required assessment of storytimes as well as informal assessment. The terms "required" and "informal" were used in order to encourage the participants to think about assessment broadly with the purpose of surfacing a wide variety of assessment-related practices.

Through these interviews, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- What types of assessment, if any, are currently occurring in libraries with regard to storytimes?
  - What types of tools, if any, are used for assessment?
- What benefits and challenges do storytime providers and library administrators identify regarding the assessment of library storytimes?
- What needs do storytime providers and administrators have regarding assessment of storytimes?
  - What needs do administrators and storytime providers have regarding the development and use of assessment tools?

First, we should explain how we understand assessment. For the purpose of this study, we look at assessment as a formative practice used to review storytimes and improve subsequent practice and/or intentionally continue specific practices.

## **Section 2: Public library storytime assessment**

Assessment, as a concept and as a process, is very complex. 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.

Our interviewees indicated they were conducting a variety of types of assessment, depending on their own needs, the needs of their communities, and the expectations of their supervisors. In this section of this report, we present each type of storytime assessment that we identified along with a description of the variations within each type and the tools that were used.

Our goal with these sections is to give you a sense of the current landscape of storytime assessment in Washington State. Once you have seen the spectrum of assessment, think about your community and the goals you and your library have for programs for young children. How do you design an assessment process that will give you what you need to continuously improve and advocate for what you do?

### What we learned:

- What types of assessment, if any, are currently occurring in libraries with regard to storytimes?

One of the most interesting broad findings we have is that there isn't as distinct a line between "formal" or "required" assessment and "informal" or "not required" assessment as we initially expected. As you'll see in the protocol, we asked about both to try and gain a holistic picture of any and all processes taking place; however, we found that

interviewees tended to refer to both interchangeably or to not use the same distinction. Furthermore, these processes 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. Stated one storytime provider,

*“It has fluctuated in the time that I've been there. For a while it was just on a need basis.... Then for a while, we were doing mentor-required assessments.... And then we also used to have once a year a manager of some sort assessing storytime. Currently I think we're, you know, in kind of a low between the next phase of whatever they're planning, so currently as far as I'm aware, they are not doing any kind of required assessment other than week's statistics.”*

Furthermore, some interviewees shied away from the term “assessment” altogether. *“It's definitely in the back of my mind, but I guess I'm approaching it more as what are some of the things that we can include in the storytimes and what are some ways that we can improve upon what we're already doing, or maybe we evaluate what we're doing. More discussion brainstorming, not so much a formal assessment.”*

#### The assessment tools

- What types of tools, if any, are used for assessment?

All of the participants discussed using some type of tool to support the different types of assessment practices that they or their department used. Tools ranged from reflection sheets devised by individual librarians, to formally required observation forms used by supervisors in some library systems.

The tools naturally fall into two different groups:

- formal tools; and
- informal tools.

Formal tools include those created specifically for the use of assessment. These tools share similar formats from library to library, including surveys, worksheets, and storytime checklists and will be discussed below in the context of various assessment types. Many of the participants reported using these formal tools to support more outward-facing assessment, such as parent surveys, and more structured assessment practices, such as supervisor observations and system-wide peer mentoring. Informal tools include those used for assessment but not specifically created for that purpose. Informal tools that are being used to support assessment were found to be extremely diverse from library to library and participant to participant, such that it was impossible to classify them into just a few categories. Many of the participants reported using informal tools to support less-structured assessment practices, such as self-reflection and peer mentoring.

In some of the library systems represented in our sample, storytime providers were expected to fill out a simple paper or electronic form with attendance and sometimes a little more information about the books or themes. For many people, this is commonly thought of as “assessment.” A storytime provider told us that the only required assessment in her system was “*recording numbers pretty much in each group.*” However, some of our interviewees pointed out the limited ability of this data to fully explain the experience of storytime. “*You can capture some qualitative data in that, but there’s just that little box where you can write things that happen. It’s not really an assessment that allows you to express like the educational benefit of whatever we did.*”

### **Part 1. Types of assessment**

“What types of assessment, if any, are currently occurring in libraries with regard to storytimes?”

We learned in our interviews of four main types, each of which contains wide variation in terms of design and implementation.

- Self-reflection
- Peer mentoring or coaching



- Parent feedback
- Administrative feedback

While most interviewees said that there was little if any required assessment happening in their library system, informal assessments such as librarians' own self reflection and conversations among peers were much more common.

### **Self-Reflection**

Self-reflection is perhaps one of the hardest types to characterize because of its inherently personal, informal, and customized nature. Where with peer mentoring practices, our interviewees typically used the pronouns “we” and “our”; when discussing self-reflection, typically the storytime providers used “I” and “my.” This is a primarily practitioner-focused, inward-facing type of assessment that seems to occur along a spectrum of which we have loosely categorized into three types:

- a) an unstructured, spontaneous way in which a storytime provider reflects on part of the storytime or storytime as a whole; or
- b) an intentional, unstructured way in which a storytime provider reflects on part of or the entire storytime; or
- c) 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.

In our interviews with practitioners, we found that self-reflection was one of the most common kinds of assessment; however, it was often overlooked or not known to administrators as a common practice. Self-reflection can be part of the planning process or just completed as part of other tasks. “*Self assessment is key,*” one storytime provider told us, “... *to making improvement and also key to not getting stuck in a rut.*” This practice seemed to have value in professional development and personal improvement.

Self-reflection can take many forms—it can happen during interactions with others, or it can be done on one's own; it can be in-depth or relatively broad; and the provider sets

their own parameters because self-reflection is meant to serve their own needs. Several storytime providers told us that they regularly engage in self-assessment either after each storytime or as they plan for an upcoming storytime.

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 to ensure they were aligning with basic storytime practice. *“‘Storytime Underground,’ ‘Bryce Don’t Play,’ and ‘Jbrary,’ these are all these amazing websites that I use as resources to kind of get confirmation that I’m not messing up completely.”* Another provider shared that they use a similar process with storytime books. *“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.”* One provider shared that they use their library’s storytime guidelines sheet for a quick reflection. *“I use the storytime guidelines sheet to make sure that I’m continually doing what my library is expecting of me.”*

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 look at whether I see children participating in what I’m asking them to do. When I assess my own success, I look to see if I’m engaging their attention, like where their focus is, and if their focus isn’t on what we’re doing, like how I can change the environment perhaps, or change, adapt something I did and make it more engaging in the future, or sometimes just, you know, accept that they’re not always going to look at me, you know.”*

Another 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,

*“We did a private checklist that we were given about how to consider if you have used the techniques in your storytime and I asked [the other storytime providers in my library system] to take that with them and pull it out before storytime and after storytime, and kind of really reflect on what they were doing and to see if they were hitting the target. I didn’t ask them to turn it in or anything, but I did ask them to share an especially valuable thing that they tried but they thought really worked well.”*

Another provider discussed how, while she is less structured in her weekly storytime reflections, she is more intentional and systematic with the reflections at the end of the storytime sessions.

*“After each storytime, I do stop and take a sec to think, ‘Okay, this did not work, I had to change this, this works, we’ll keep it.’ But it’s less formal and then like brief ten minutes thinking about it afterwards. So 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.’”*

Some approaches are even outward-facing in their reflectiveness. One storytime provider stated, *“I also have a blog.... I find that is a really helpful way to evaluate my own storytimes... for each book I’ll post what worked about it... for myself and for other librarians who might be reading it and planning their own storytimes.”*

Tools:

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. In fact, many of the resources or “tools” that they report using may not typically be considered to be

assessment tools. However, according to one provider, *“I think it is a tool if I’m using it that way.”*

Some of the more common types of tools used for self-reflection are:

- Observations of children/observation notes
- Storytime blogs (personal and external)
- Monthly report
- Storytime attendance statistics
- VIEWS2 tools

Many storytime providers said they used observations of the children and their reactions during storytime to help them understand and reflect on the impact of their storytimes and storytime activities. *“I look at whether the kids were staring at me with blank looks in their eyes or were they really engaged, and was that a result of me bringing the wrong materials or just not clicking with them that time, or vice versa.”* Most reported making notes of these observations after the storytime to help them plan for next time. *“I watch their [the children’s] reactions and take mental notes throughout the entire storytime and then I go back to my office afterwards, write those observations down, and see how I can adjust it to maybe hold their attention more.”*

A few storytime providers reported using storytime blogs for self-reflection. Some mentioned using blogs that are maintained by others. *“My colleagues, where I used to work, have storytime blogs that I use as a way to ensure that I am up to date on the newest tricks and tools that others are using.”* Others used their own personal blogs as a way to reflect on their storytime. One provider, in speaking about her blog posts mentioned, *“I list out all the elements that I included in my storytimes; both nursery rhymes, songs, and books. And by doing that, I find that I reflect on which were more successful and which were not.”*

Several libraries tracked storytime attendance statistics as a way to assess their storytimes and some storytime providers mentioned using these statistics to help them reflect on

their storytimes. *“If there is a huge drop in numbers over a time period rather than just a day, then I start to wonder, ‘Okay, what’s not happening that should be happening.’”* Similarly, another storytime provider reported, *“We use it to see how many people are attending our storytimes. Are those numbers increasing or decreasing, and why?”*

Some storytime providers said that they used the monthly reporting process as a catalyst for further reflection.

*“We have to do a monthly report first for our branches and for the youth services department every month, so yes, that’s the time to reflect on our programming and what we thought went well; areas for improvement; anything that we might have noticed that worked and things that we would stress not doing again. That happens monthly. I do some just on my own. As a storyteller I always enjoyed reflecting on how my storytimes go. I have a file. I just do a quick overview about what we covered and what the kids were really receptive to. And I also just try to keep track of things that we do.”*

Several storytime providers mentioned using the VIEWS2 tools to support their self-reflection. One provider discussed using them in a systematic and intentional manner. *“I specifically use the Views2 tools. I’ll assign an indicator to a storytime, along with the points that I want to talk about, and then after the storytime I assess whether or not I was able to get those points in and what worked with those.”* Another mentioned using the VIEWS2 tools as a more of a quick assessment: *“I found it, more than anything, a really great tool for reminding myself and for helping me to look at my storytimes to see ‘Okay, am I getting some of this into all of my storytimes?’”*

The personal nature of self-reflection and the degree to which storytime providers may customize processes and tools for reflections makes it difficult to describe the full range of practices in use. Self-reflection, however, was a common assessment practice among many of the storytime providers in our sample, and therefore deserves careful consideration. Library administrators in our sample mentioned self-reflection less often

than the storytime providers did; this may indicate less awareness among library leaders of this common and important assessment practice.

### **Peer Mentoring**

During the interviews we heard many examples of how storytime providers are participating as peers in the assessment process. One storytime provider shared: *“Peer mentoring for storytimes is a really good way to get feedback for yourself but also to observe somebody else’s storytimes, and so I think it’s a great model to have in place. It reminds us that we need to be mindful about the elements of each storytime that we do.”* Another put it this way: *“The peer to peer thing is nice because you get to see other people doing storytime and kind of measure where you are related to them and it’s a good way to get new ideas.”*

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.

It is important to note that the interviewees used both “peer mentoring” and “peer coaching” as terms to describe interactions between colleagues that elicited professional development feedback.

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 system as follows:

*“One thing that we do as a group of youth services people is we do peer to peer observation of each other twice a year. It’s not exactly an assessment but it is fairly structured. [It involves an observation of a peer storytime using an*

*established form.]<sup>2</sup> It's not about judging someone else; it's about kind of learning from what they're doing and then being able to incorporate that into our practice, but it also helps all of us kind of maintain the same standards of quality within our library system."*

Most of the library systems represented by our sample did not have formalized systems of peer assessment. Some systems were just at the beginning stages of doing peer mentoring or coaching. One storytime provider shared,

*"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.... It's really nice to have time to just sit down and talk about storytime."*

In fact, few of the storytime providers we interviewed indicated that they regularly had dedicated opportunities to observe peers' storytimes and give feedback. At the same time, most of the storytime providers with whom we spoke, even the most seasoned, said that they appreciated getting feedback when a colleague was able to observe one of their storytimes and talk about it afterwards.

As with self-reflection, peer mentoring can in many cases also be informal and even spontaneous, with feedback-based conversations with a colleague occurring at the reference desk after a program; in the storytime room with colleagues while rearranging for another event; etc. One storytime provider said that because "*our reference desk is right outside the storytime room,*" she could often informally observe the other storytime providers. Another librarian told of sharing ideas with colleagues "*in our off-desk time, or actually at the reference desk, too.*"

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<sup>2</sup> Content redacted to maintain confidentiality.

Others spoke of how fortunate they felt to work with colleagues who could informally assess storytimes and provide feedback. *“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 like 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.

Librarians in rural areas or smaller branches, however, indicated that it was often difficult to get feedback. One librarian spoke of the *“isolation that can happen, you know, in the library where you’re the only youth service specialist.”*

In the cases where storytime providers did have regularly scheduled meetings with peers, our interviewees said that they appreciated sharing ideas and getting feedback when they had opportunities to be together. One storytime provider said, *“We have a number of people who do storytime in our system. We get together for a workshop twice a year, and we talk about things we’re working on. I am often the person who plans this workshop so I ask people to present on certain topics or to raise certain topics.”* Not all of the library systems represented by our participants have such meetings, however, and in many cases the meetings are intermittent. Several participants also indicated that such meetings are now less common than they had been in the past.

It seems that some new staff with less training may also be assigned mentors or supervisors who assess and/or coach them. One librarian described mentoring and planning with a paraprofessional in one of the branches that she is responsible for: *“The youth person who is there more hours than I am—we definitely go back and forth and we talk about how her storytimes are going... we work together... but the scope of her responsibility is such that she can’t do some of the things that I am supposed to do.”*

New employees may also have more opportunities to observe storytimes and be observed than veterans do. One administrator told us that such 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.*” Formal mentorship or coaching programs, however, did not appear to be very common in the libraries represented in our sample—at least not beyond the new-hire process.

Another administrator told us that, *“The only formal mentorship happens usually when there’s like a new hire or we have any sort of internship for that person who’s going to be conducting storytimes.”* Such formal mentorship at the outset, however, may help build a foundation for informal peer coaching later. This same administrator went on to say, *“For those staff that have gone through that whole mentorship training project, it is an ongoing project that we check in on all the time. And I would say... that I feel like we do mentor each other. We are always talking to each other and getting feedback.”*

Tools:

Different types of peer mentoring tools included:

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

For peer mentoring systems that include observations, libraries are using a few different tools to guide the observations, and all of them follow-up the observation with verbal feedback based on these tools. One library reported using a checklist to guide the peer observation. *“When we are matched up with a peer, we observe each other’s storytimes and there’s a checklist that we can go through during the storytime to make notes and see if the storytime hits on the parts of early literacy that we like to encourage in storytimes.”*

Other libraries use worksheets to guide the observation and conversation. These worksheets typically have a few broad questions and the storytime providers write what

they observe in response to those questions. At one library, storytime providers take freehand notes during the observation to help guide the follow-up conversation. *“We are 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.”*

Finally, a few libraries use the VIEWS2 tools in their peer mentoring. One library uses them to guide the observation and the following conversation. *“We watch our colleagues and then use the tools from VIEWS2 to analyze and highlight what they’re doing really well.”* Another library uses them during the conversation to highlight specific early literacy pieces. *“When we evaluate each other, we talk about the VIEWS2 stuff. For example, when I was observing my co-worker I used the VIEWS2 tool to connect what they were doing to a specific skill. I think it’s helpful to make explicit connections like that.”*

### **Parent/Caregiver Feedback**

In addition to self-reflection and peer mentoring as methods to assess storytimes, we also heard about several 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/caregiver feedback seemed most often to take the form of:

- Spontaneous conversation
- Intentional methods for feedback

Several libraries reported obtaining parent feedback through spontaneous conversations with parents and caregivers before and after storytime. Storytime providers discussed intentionally 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.” However, at other times the feedback from parents and caregivers was spontaneous and unsolicited. “We will have parents come up and tell us a song that their kid particularly liked. For example, I had a newer kid in storytime whose grandmother came up to me and said ‘That song you sang last week, she won’t stop singing it.’ So little things like that where you know something worked something outside of the library is really helpful.”*

One administrator supported the power of spontaneous assessment from the storytime audience for the storytime provider. *“You know, if a mom says that was great, then that’s what the librarian hears and believes, and if the children react in a positive way and come back week after week after week and they really enjoy it and give you hugs, that’s also an affirmation that what you’re doing has value and is a good thing.”*

Libraries also reported using more intentional, targeted methods of assessment with parents and caregivers. These intentional methods most commonly took the form of surveys (discussed more in-depth below). These intentional methods allowed storytime providers and administrators to receive assessment of their storytimes from parents and caregivers on a variety of topics.

Tools:

The common types of parent feedback tools included:

- Survey
- Verbal conversations
- Social media

Several storytime providers reported using written paper surveys with their parents and caregivers, which allowed them to solicit more targeted and specific feedback.

Sometimes these surveys were developed and created at the system level. *“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 results go up to the supervisors to be combined as a whole for the entire district and storytime providers don't tend to see a lot of the results from it."*

Other times, the storytime provider created and used the survey on their own, for their personal use, to ensure their storytime is meeting the needs of their community. *"I'll do a caregiver's sheet just asking how the storytimes are going, about the time, the materials provided in the storytime, and the things that are covered in the storytime. There are things that caregivers might report that they would like to see that I'm missing and that's just for personal use."* For the storytime providers, libraries, and library systems that were using written surveys for parent and caregiver assessments of storytime, most reported administering the surveys during or after storytime.

Outside of verbal conversations and paper surveys, storytime providers mentioned using a few other tools for parent and caregiver assessment of storytimes. One storytime provider mentioned using the library's Facebook page as a way for parents and caregivers to provide spontaneous feedback. *"Our library has a Facebook page and sometimes we add storytimes or other events going on at the library. When people comment on that or like it, I think that's definitely a way that we can gauge what people are saying about storytime and if there are any changes we need to make. For example, if people are talking about 'Oh, I wish it were a different time of day,' we can be receptive to that."*

Another storytime provider mentioned using an online survey tool to survey the parents and caregivers. On a previous paper survey, the storytime provider asked parents and caregivers for their permission, and their email address, in order to follow up with them via online survey. *"I used Survey Monkey and that was pretty effective. I had a pretty good result from it. So I thought that was a nice way of getting people to respond."*

A majority of the parent assessments are used to help the storytime provider, library, and library system understand on a surface-level, if the storytime content is effective and meeting the needs of the community. However, a few storytime providers and library systems are using their parent/caregiver surveys as a way to dig a bit deeper and better

understand the needs and desires of their storytime community and the effectiveness of the storytime with regards to learning for the child and the parent/caregiver. One storytime provider shared, *“I’ve done surveys to determine what days and times in the week are working for people, would they prefer us to have more of a play and learn storytime or would they prefer to have more of a regular one, and do they do anything at home with their children as a result of attending the program.”* One administrator reported that they were developing a survey that, in addition to other questions, would allow parents and caregivers to report their child’s early literacy skills as a result of storytime. *“The last question on the survey is, ‘Storytimes are designed to model and enhance the pre-reading skills of playing and reading and talking and singing and writing. So please check the early literacy behaviors below that you feel your child gained as a result of attending storytime.’ And then it goes through at least ten behaviors, such as, ‘enjoys visits to the library, knows how to hold a book, and recognizes rhyming words.’”*

#### ***Administrator/Supervisor Feedback***

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
- New-hire observation
- Annual performance review

Administrators were typically using the types above to support the professional development of the storytime providers. Although they were all vested in the professional development of the storytime provider, the administrator relationship varied from library to library. In some libraries, a children’s coordinator or children’s service manager

(someone at the system-level that is in charge of all children's services) will handle the assessment. In other libraries, the storytime provider's direct manager may handle the assessment.

Several administrators reported using observations and follow-up discussions of all 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. One administrator commented, *"We don't call them assessment so much as observation because it is an interactive experience in the sense that I observe, I make notes, I meet with the librarian, we talk about possible changes and then that is shared with the librarian and with their manager."* Another administrator reported that it typically turns into a positive sharing experience: *"usually at least once a year I go out and observe their storytimes and they're all really good at it so it turns into a 'I really like that you did this.' That's the kind of what we do in terms of making sure that people are on track with what they're doing."*

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."* Another administrator shared, *"In our performance appraisal, one of the questions is about programming, are they doing enough programming with the quality of the programming."* Another mentioned including storytimes in the annual review but expressed the limitations of the format to provide thorough feedback.

*"It's more of a, 'Yep, you did an okay job,' and then you write a brief paragraph saying, you know, 'And their storytimes are lovely,' that sort of thing. There's not really place in that venue to go through and talk about the storytime. Brevity is encouraged on the annual performance appraisal."*

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.

*“Most of the time, storytime providers come in and they’ve have a lot of theory [from MLIS classes] and they haven’t had an opportunity to sit down in front of a group. 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.”*

Another administrator reported that their new-hires actually go through multiple observations.

*“At the beginning, as we are training people to do storytime, we have them do a certain number of observations. And then they are required to prepare a storytime and present it for my library services manager and get feedback. And then also they’re observed once within the first couple of weeks of them regularly doing storytime.”*

## Tools

The most common tools used to support administrator assessment were:

- Checklists
- Forms
- Observation notes
- Verbal conversations

Some administrators reported using checklists to support their assessment. *“A storytime checklist was created by staff with the coordinator facilitating the discussion so she takes it with her when she goes to observe storytimes.”* Checklists appeared to be beneficial to administrators that did not have experience with storytimes and children’s services. One library reported that as a catalyst for the creation of their checklist. *“And because I was working with a handful of people who don’t have any children’s background, I went ahead and developed a checklist of what should be present in the storytime.”*

Other libraries reported using various forms during the administrative assessment process. In most cases the administrator(s) and others had developed these forms to support the assessment.

*“We created an internal document for use by the site supervisor to evaluate and look at the storytime, what components are actually being provided by the storyteller librarian. It’s based on the Every Child Ready to Read skills and practices and it includes what does play at your storytime look like today. It also talks about the environment within the storytime room and the use of materials and integration of things other than the books.”*

One administrator reported that she used a form that covered storytime in-depth.

*“I have a sheet that I go through while I’m in storytime and it covers things such as, book choice, voice, engagement, eye contact, crowd management, just every single aspect. Are they incorporating early learning? Are they talking about resources? So the entire storytime, from the moment the storytime begins, actually before the storytime begins. How do they set up the room? How are they greeting? How are they saying goodbye?”*

While some administrators used formal tools to observe, others just used freehand notes to help them capture information from the observation. One administrator shared, *“When I go to observe a storytime, I basically take nothing but me. I may jot down a note or two on something that happens but I really—I don’t have any tool, any formal tool whatsoever when I go observe a children’s program.”* Another shared, *“I observe, I make notes, I meet with the librarian, we talk about possible changes and then that is shared with the librarian and with their manager.”*

Several administrators reported using verbal conversations as an assessment tool, either as a follow-up to an observation or as a stand-alone event. Verbal conversations were frequently used to discuss the results of an observation. *“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.”* A few others mentioned using spontaneous conversations as a tool for sharing information and feedback.

*“I’ll see them and I might say, ‘Oh, how was storytime today?’ And then they will let me know what was going on. Not necessarily specifically about what they were reading or what type of activities were involved. They will tell me that they had*



*this many people and they were, especially active today or they were more reserved today, or things like that.”*

Another administrator shared, *“Sometimes it is the librarian coming over to my office and knocking on the door and talking to me about something that happened at storytime today.”*

Overall, administrative assessment is an important piece of the broader assessment process. Directors tend to see the bigger picture of assessment and understand that while all of the pieces are important, one of the most important purposes of assessment is advocacy to the board and the broader community. *“My perspective as a Director is less important on an individual basis in terms of evaluating my youth services librarian because it’s only one piece of the puzzle anyway. The bigger issue is getting the library’s story out to the community and to our stakeholders: what we’re doing and what we’re accomplishing.”*

Administrators did discuss using assessment information to advocate for storytimes and other programs with both their board and the broader community. Different administrators reported gathering different types of information to use for advocacy.

*“I have a monthly library update that I do with city council and if, you know, if I observe or hear about a great program of any kind including storytimes, or anything that happens over the children’s side, that’s a sort of thing I love to share with city council as the main body that works overall on the budget that the library gets every year.”*

Another administrator shared, *“it tends to be those quantitative numbers. You know, these are the programs, these are the numbers of people that are showing up and this is what we’re trying to do with our programming.”*

While several mentioned sharing quantitative information (attendance numbers and number of storytime offerings), qualitative information (stories and anecdotes), or both, several expressed a desire for more outcome-based information. *“When we can communicate where the outcomes are, kids who come to our storytimes are learning*

*these skills and demonstrating them and they're ready for kindergarten and this way, that communicates the value at a different level to the stakeholders in our community and I think that would be really, really useful."*

## **Part 2: The benefits and challenges of assessment**

- "What benefits and challenges do storytime providers and library administrators identify regarding the assessment of library storytimes?"

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.

Advocacy is perhaps one of the biggest benefits of a well-planned assessment program of public library storytimes. In a time of constant, dynamic change in the public community and in government, libraries are often asked to demonstrate their worth and to communicate that worth to taxpayers and voters. It is important that programs are enjoyable, interactive, and child-focused; it is simultaneously important that the public be aware of these advantages. As stated by one administrator,

*"We need to say that we are actually providing a very valid service and that it is something that kids benefit from and that families really look forward to. We are spending their money wisely. We are reaffirming that parents are the first and best teachers and we're your partners in that and we're all in this together. Let's grow this great group of kids."*

In a time of uncertain budgets, one administrator spoke of assessment as a way of *"making sure what we do is justifiable."*

To be able to advocate strongly for the benefits of storytimes for children and families, you need confidence that the programs do have an impact and do make a difference.

Stated an administrator,

*“We need to have a level of confidence that the program is having the desired impact. So if we’re talking about the way the program supports or has positive impact on the community, we need to be able to speak to that in a specific way. We know that storytime as an activity is popular. But I think in the absence of some level of assessment, we don’t know what kind of impact it’s having beyond people’s enjoyment, which may be enough, but I think the library is looking for something potentially larger and deeper, if that’s possible within this program.”*

So this administrator’s perception is that assessment can provide the “What” of the advocacy message—what difference is this programming making in the lives of the people served by the library?

Impact can also be felt in terms of relationships with parents and caregivers as well. Another administrator highlighted the potential for assessment to enable *“constant improvement, making storytime a welcoming place for children and families, thereby reaffirming that the library is working with families.”* This is potentially the “Why” of advocacy—why supporters should continue to care so they in turn can advocate for what the library offers to children and families. This is also the “Who”—for whom are libraries providing these services and who is most important in this work?

A desire for advocacy comes at the storytime provider level as well:

*“I would hope that we are getting a sense that we’re all kind of keeping things at a high level of quality. I would like to see funding and ongoing support in different ways of storytime or early literacy coming out of what is observed. I would like to see us be able to communicate to the public better about what we’re doing and why storytimes are important or early literacy is important and where libraries fit in that.”*

Storytime providers also talked about goals, especially in terms of meeting goals set by the library: *“Well, [assessment] is a way to make sure that we’re staying on track with the goals that we’ve identified and one of them of course is early literacy.”*

Advocacy through assessment needs to speak to community-based desires as well. And in many ways this opens up opportunities for a dialogue between librarians and storytime providers and the community to better understand needs. One administrator talked about how assessment, broadly speaking, can provide feedback for the storytime provider, enable professional development, and maintain a high level of quality for the practice. When storytime providers better understand their practice, they can continually improve and build on their storytimes, which can lead to increased attendance and a better opportunity for learning for the children who attend.

Some interviewees also discussed how assessment could enable increased general understanding among library staff about the importance of storytime in developing children’s early learning skills. This speaks to the “How” of assessment in advocacy—how libraries go about providing their services so that they make an impact. As storytime providers understand their practice and are better understood by their peers and colleagues, they can then take risks and feel supported in their endeavors. In turn they can share ideas with each other and remain *“engaged and enthusiastic about their storytimes.”* Additionally, another storytime provider stated, *“Well, one thing I think it does is keep it fresh for me so it doesn’t become just routine and then that keeps it more engaging for the kids too. And by routine, I mean just, you know, having the same set of storytimes and using them over and over.”*

This then leads to another benefit—positive, informed, ongoing dialogue between staff and supervisors. The more that everyone understands the practice of storytime, the learning that is inherent in the practice, and the impact on both the children who attend and the larger community, the more constructive the conversations and mentoring will be within and across organizations. A community of practice built around storytime as an early learning program can advocate for this work effectively and collectively. Stated one

storytime provider, assessment can “give a supervisor an opportunity to observe what really happens in storytimes. Some of them have never been children’s librarians and so it’s a good tool for them.”

As an administrator stated, it should be possible to,

*“leverage, to capture some of the activity in informal assessments that help the individual, and then also help build the larger community of practice. We can expect certain elements to be part of storytime at the public library, not necessarily delivered in the same way, but there’s a benefit to knowing that something works really well no matter who tells it. That way we can better represent what happens in storytime however it is assessed, which helps administrators communicate the value of storytime and build a good feeling for the library. There’s a larger impact or value to the organization in terms of a family’s association with the public library, not just as a place they go for storytime but as a place where I go where I feel good when I’m there.”*

Broadly speaking, the main challenges around assessment included:

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

Looking first at time and staffing, one administrator talked exactly about how these challenges impact their staff: *“It’s time, time, time. And a fine line between assessing and over-assessing, and/or becoming too academic for a public library. And so it’s being aware of yes, we need to do assessment and no, we don’t have to go to be too thorough in order to get the outcomes that we would like.”*

A storytime provider raised this concern:

*“Our particular staff, they already are under so much pressure to do more; more and more with technology and programming and helping, you know, a variety of people coming to the library that I think the assessment might just feel like one*

*more stress for them. And then the other thing is whether or not the assessment will be accurately measuring. Would we find that we're doing assessments and we're just not getting the kind of data we want, the data is inaccurate? So I guess looking at more of how it's measured and whether or not the measurements are even accurate."*

This person continued by saying,

*"We can definitely measure participation and whether or not people are finding the storytimes enjoyable, helpful, engaging; things of that nature. But I find it would be harder to measure based on each individual child that comes to our storytime, whether or not they're being impacted. We could measure whether or not we're including certain elements into our storytime and making sure that those things are being presented at each storytime. But I'm not sure if that needs to be a formal assessment again or if it's just something that we can kind of agree by consensus."*

Despite the perceived benefit of assessment providing the necessary information regarding impact, there is a concern about the nature of that impact. One storytime provider pointed out, *"Well, I think being able to capture what exactly the kids and families are getting out of it is kind of a big gap in what we're doing; we don't know exactly how it's impacting people."*

Stated one administrator, *"If we rely on [assessment] 100%, that's the biggest challenge or risk."* This person talked about how assessment is contextual and might not reflect long-term changes and improvements; you can't look for patterns or trends. *"It isn't the best way to capture a trajectory that you either want somebody to be on or that somebody should set for themselves."*

Storytime is a very personal program. There is a personal way in which providers deliver their content. The same administrator talked about how assessment *"can be intimidating to people; you can run into danger trying to assess every style into one box. Not every*

*style fits into one box and not every style is necessarily assessable with the same tools.”*

Is assessment capturing all the ways in which development and growth are happening in a program, with a provider, within an institution?

Frequency of assessment was also a factor. According to one storytime provider, *“I felt like if we were to include required assessment on a regular basis, (Storytime happens once a week minimum, for some of us it happens three times a week) like for every Storytime, I think would be overkill in a lot of situations, so I’m hesitant to require assessment for a regular period.”*

One administrator touched specifically on concerns raised by storytime providers regarding the potential relationship between assessment and performance reviews: *“I think [it’s] the whole idea of it being tied to performance. This idea that formal assessment means that I’m tying this to your performance and it’s not a positive thing. It’s a negative thing, so really what [does] that tool look like and how [do] you communicate to people that this is just about providing support, not to necessarily, you know, knock you down.”* Once again, this is touching on what is being assessed, why it’s being assessed, and then how that assessment is being used.

Regarding buy-in and pushback, one storytime provider brought up the issue of trust: *“I would imagine [assessment] feels a little bit intrusive; there’s that trust quality there of ‘don’t you think I’m doing this well enough?’ It is one more thing to do.”* Related to this is the issue of whether an assessment would fit every situation, every type of library. One storytime provider put it this way: *“Finding an assessment that would work for all of us in all of our age ranges I think is another big challenge we have.”* Another storytime provider stated, *“There would probably be pushback from librarians who have been doing things a certain way for a long time.”*

Lack of buy-in and pushback may also be related to insecurity and lack of confidence amidst one’s peers. One storytime provider shared that, *“We had some folks who are not*

*as confident and worried about being judged and so we are trying to think of a scenario that would give room for people to grow and to learn and to not be judgmental.”*

The benefits and challenges specific to each type of assessment in many ways echo some of these broad statements—opportunity for community, advocacy, time and staffing, and pushback. However, in other ways these individual types have their own unique benefits and challenges as well.

### **Self-Reflection**

Because the process of self-reflection is inherently an introspective one, it affords a storytime provider the opportunity to be aware of your practice, and to advocate for yourself. *“Being self aware as a storyteller of what you’re doing and just growth in storytelling and making sure that you’re being the best advocate for early literacy that you can.”*

Reflecting on your practice also enables you to think about how to connect your practice with what children need for an improved experience. One storytime provider shared that

*“Storytimes run smoother and more effective. When I’m more effective I think everybody has a better time, you know, it’s a more meaningful experience. They want to come back. My relationship with those individual children is really important because I think that they thrive on that and so the more I learn what connects with them, like this particular child is going to be here today just loves this particular rhyme, I might make sure I always do that. Because that’s a real good connection. So you know that helps it.”*

At times, even in a big, bustling library, a storytime provider can get can feel stuck in a rut and caught up in the same practices and materials. Taking a step back and assessing the reactions of the audience as well as their own feelings about what they’re doing and what they’re using can make a big difference. Said one storytime provider, *“Being self aware as a storyteller of what you’re doing and just growth in storytelling and making sure that you’re being the best advocate for early literacy that you can.”* Said another



storytime provider, *“The benefit is that I could watch myself and evaluate myself. In the middle of the storytime I’m sure I’m not aware of everything I’m saying.”*

It can be beneficial for seasoned librarians as well to have a chance after so many years to take a look and see what they’re doing: One storytime provider suggests that *“If there’s a moment where a children’s librarian says, ‘What am I doing? You know, I’ve been doing the same thing for years. Maybe it’s time for me to re-look at that,’ so I think there is some benefit to that.”*

There are challenges to self-reflection, too, not the least of which is time—time to watch a video of oneself, and time to set up a video and record the storytime when there might be pushback from families for the recording. Without a specific rubric or form to follow, it can also be difficult to know how to reflect and understand what they’re watching. One storytime provider shared the following:

*“Probably, you know, I do it by thinking about it but I’d kind of like to have some kind of written [form]. I mean that would make it a more formal than informal I guess. I guess if I had kind of a set of rubrics, is that the right term that I want? And I could make something like this for myself and then make sure I have different categories checked off. I just don’t ever do that.”*

### **Peer Mentoring**

Community proved to be a central benefit to peer mentoring throughout many of the interviews we conducted. Assessment conducted by a peer colleague for another colleague seemed to help librarians feel part of a system and enabled them to feel they can turn to each other for help, share ideas, and feel comfortable in the community.

One administrator said, *“I think that informal sharing of this information will help librarians feel like they really are a part of a big system, that they can turn to each other when they need assistance, and just feel comfortable, so that when they are in meetings that they feel like, ‘Oh I know these colleagues, I don’t get to see them very often but I know them.”* Furthermore, several storytime providers spoke to how peer-based

assessment processes can offer opportunities to discuss the progress of a program across a system and provide new perspectives for feedback and idea sharing. *“It’s helpful to see your storytime from someone else’s eyes because it’s easy to get stuck doing the same thing over and over again or to not realize what an impact you actually do have on people, so it’s really nice to hear from someone else how it’s actually happening.”*

Another storytime provider touched on the fact that peer assessment offers the opportunity to think and reflect on one’s practice, which may indicate a shared benefit with self-reflection.

Administrators also highlighted the importance of listening to and borrowing from one another and building relationships: *“Building on the opportunities to share across the system with colleagues that both more experienced to the new ones to those that are kind of dead smack in the middle; to add to your skill by feeling comfortable, talking with people about things you know or don’t know or would like more information about.”*

Something rather remarkable that came up in these interviews is the desire to learn about activities, content, and ideas that aren’t already familiar and well-known: *“For the peer coaching, I’ve just gotten tons of new ideas which is great. You know, new rhymes and songs and books that, you know, you normally wouldn’t think about.”* This storytime provider goes on to further emphasize how the peer community enables one to not feel alone, to understand that others face many of the same concerns and could provide *“reassurance that, you know, other people are dealing with the same stuff, like they hear your problems and stuff like that. I feel like it’s a team building thing almost.”*

Hand-in-hand with not feeling alone and being a part of a community is the benefit of immediate feedback when storytime practice can feel isolating. And this speaks to professional development: *“The most direct benefit is to the provider, the children’s librarian, or the storyteller. Whether it’s regular, ongoing or a consistent approach, the storyteller is going to get immediate feedback beyond what the audience is saying, and I think that’s important for professional development mostly. Also to maintain a high level of quality of the service itself.”*

Peer-related assessment processes are not without concerns and hesitations, however. Pushback seems to be a common concern among our interviewees—provider and administrator alike. *“We walked a pretty fine line that these are the ways to you should be thinking about it and how you’re supposed to be doing it but that it’s not a subjective checklist,”* an administrator told us. *“We’ve been very careful not to create a checklist for storytelling. It’s also the reason why we incorporated the peer-to-peer coaching element... so that staff could have that chance to talk with a peer versus talking with a boss or supervisor with regard to how they’re doing their storytimes.”*

There can be resistance to the implementation of a system as well. Shared one interviewee,

*“We started out with a little bit of push back with the idea when we started doing peer-to-peer, primarily among established librarians who had been doing storytimes for years and who did not feel that they needed to spend any time reflecting or reviewing anybody else’s. Now, that has passed we’ve been doing it now for almost four years.... As we have gone on and because we always make sure we do that follow up and have them talk to each other in the larger group about what they saw, what they learned, what they’ve incorporated into their own practice, there’s been a much greater acceptance and an easier incorporation of it into their everyday practice.”*

Examining the theme of buy-in, this concept touches on several inherent issues. One administrator who also delivers storytimes mentioned concerns related to trust across peers and the potential impact of this assessment on existing relationships: *“It’s defensiveness, like why are you asking me about storytime. I read stories all the time, because I’ve been doing this for years. So it’s just a little bit more of a defensive thing, like I do my storytime my way, you do yours your way.”* Assessment can feel unfamiliar and perhaps even uncomfortable, as explained by this storytime provider: *“It does feel a little bit awkward to have to evaluate your coworker like someone who’s really kind of an equal level as you. But I thought it would be more awkward than it was. It really was*

*more like fun sharing time than a criticizing time. I think it's less scary than I thought it would be. But it can be intimidating, like the idea of evaluating your coworkers."*

This concern about intimidation and discomfort also extends to relationships between peers around assessment:

*"There's fear or hesitancy around [assessment] so even if this is shared on an informal basis, will this somehow come back formally to haunt me? Meaning, you know, if I sort of solicit a colleague's advice on maybe what I'm doing, will that colleague be in sort of report back that maybe there are some concerns about, you know, XYZ? As I said, I just think, you know, in some instances, training formally or informally can sometimes make people feel sort of horrible."*

It's clear that there are serious concerns around why assessment is being conducted and what its impact might be on the practice, on one's performance review, and on community relationships.

Storytime providers also echoed broader concerns about staffing issues, time, and workload around peer-related assessment processes, despite a desire to have a system in place that would allow for time to watch others' storytimes and learning from one another. *"We wish that there was something that could be set up so we could watch each other's storytimes and see what other people are doing. We don't really have a lot of that and a lot of opportunity for that, and often have storytimes at the same time."*

Interestingly enough, one storytime provider talked about how peer assessment can actually be isolating, if it happens infrequently, and it doesn't lead to much impact if not much feedback is given: *"You do feel kind of isolated in storytimes because I mean you have one person come and visit once a year but they don't really give you tips with their peer coaching. They don't really give you tips on how to do it better."*

### **Parent/Caregiver Feedback**

Parents and caregivers represent an external voice of feedback and assessment that in many ways can provide validation and support as well as important critique to improve the practice of storytimes and help customize them to community needs.

Those we interviewed that mentioned parent/caregiver-focused or parent/caregiver-based assessments also mentioned broad themes of impact, confidence, and direct feedback as potential benefits; and time and buy-in from parents/caregivers as primary challenges to this assessment process.

*“Are we actually accomplishing what we hope to be accomplishing?”* asked one administrator, when looking at a parent-focused assessment process, believing parents/caregivers could help answer this question through their feedback. Enabling the storytime provider to have confidence that their work is making a difference, having an impact on the families they serve, was also a perceived benefit of feedback and assessment from parents/caregivers. *“I would imagine [direct feedback from parents/caregivers] would be useful for determining and what’s happening, whether your staff is being effective,”* stated a storytime provider.

There were clear challenges, too, to this process of assessment of storytimes. One storytime provider mentioned,

*“It is one more thing to do and it isn’t always easy to get the parents to take the time to do it. They aren’t that interested, like for us to do it every single time for ten weeks or twelve weeks, by the time we’ve done it, and they wanted it every single session. It’s just saying that people had come, they had already filled it out, that you know you almost twist their arms, c’mon, fill it out again. so I think it kind of changes the tone a little bit, of what you’re doing. There are some obstacles for sure. I don’t like to do it all the time. I don’t want to do it every single time. But I’d like to do it periodically. So that we do it, we get some information, and then we go on and then we do it and get some information.”*

Buy-in from parents/caregivers for a survey at the end of each program, especially if they come all the time can become tedious, as explained by this provider, even if it seems that

it yields good information. How do you demonstrate the effectiveness of this method of assessment to both a supervisor and the parents/caregivers?

One administrator pointed out: *“Informal assessment happens oftentimes by the parents and the caregivers and the kids, and by building that good feeling for the library, there’s a larger impact or a larger value to the organization in terms of a family’s association with the public library, not just as a place they go for storytime, but as a place where I go when I feel good when I’m there.”*

There is another way to look at this, however. Earlier, in the section on broad discussion of benefits and challenges related to assessment, we talked about how it can be problematic to rely on assessment 100% because that feedback can be taken in terms of one event and not seen across a longer time period. It is possible, then, that parent-based feedback, especially if solicited multiple times across a series of storytimes (but not excessively so), could provide that more longitudinal perspective about a series of programs. That perspective could then help the provider paint a larger picture of the impact and impression they have made on the community they serve through this programming. However, what is that balance between frequency of assessment and gaining valuable insight?

#### ***Administrator/Supervisor Feedback***

Administrator feedback poses benefits and challenges that in some ways mirror the ones listed above but with an added twist: these benefits and challenges often figure around both the administrator’s relationship with the storytime provider as well as the administrator’s and library’s relationship with the community.

Regarding advocacy, one administrator emphasized how when administrators can

*“better represent what happens in storytime informally or formally, however it is assessed, [they can] communicate the value and build that good feeling for the library. There’s a larger impact or value to the organization in terms of a family’s*

*association with the public library, not just as a place they go for storytime but as a place where I go when I feel good when I'm there."*

Another administrator talks about how they are *"dealing with that sort of tension between what librarians have always done, also being a popular activity, and then attempting to look for ways for it to really demonstrate its worth in a more objective and less subjective way.*

Furthermore, through assessment, administrators can

*"ensure all children's librarians receive the same materials, give the same kind of message, offer the same kinds of resources to the public; and that means talking about materials, talking about early learning, talking about the resources online, talking about our world language storytimes, just to make sure everything is covered."*

Administrators can perhaps gain a deeper understanding of staff needs with respect to storytime. *"It does help us in terms of staffing, to know what we need at that time when storytimes are going on."* And *"Currently, everyone I supervise is always hungry to learn more and will notice when local trainings at workshops are offered and ask permission to attend those. Whenever possible, I grant permission. So our annual evaluation is a good opportunity for them to tell me what their training needs are for the upcoming year."*

Administrators can also gain a better understanding of the practice of storytimes, which also helps those the admin supervises. One interviewee shared that the assessment can *"give a supervisor an opportunity to observe what really happens in storytimes. Some of them have never been children's librarians and so it's a good tool for them."*

As administrators also do performance reviews, it is unavoidable that one concern around assessment—formal or informal—might involve whether the assessment is also tied to that review. Could this reflect badly on the storytime provider? One storytime provider shared: *"There's always the anxiety: is this going to be in my performance review and*

*okay, so we had a bunch of squirrely kids today and no matter what I did, it didn't work so you're really going to count that against me? No, there's always – you can't guarantee a public's going to behave itself no matter how many little tricks you pull out of your bag.”*

Administrators also deal with pushback regarding assessment. *“There are some librarians who like getting feedback and being told what they can do to improve their work, and there are librarians who don't. There is something very personal about way librarian delivers the program--personal value, personal worth of the activity. Assessment can be intimidating to people; you can run into danger trying to assess every style in the one box and not every style fits into a box, and not every style is necessarily assessable with the same tools.”*

This same administrator offers a solution to this challenge: *“One of the hopes is, can we at least identify outcomes that we'd like to achieve and then be open to or flexible enough to a variety of styles that might achieve this outcome, so we can focus on measuring outcomes more than on measuring the person if you will.”*

### **Part 3: Stakeholders needs with respect to assessment**

- “What needs do storytime providers and administrators have regarding assessment of storytimes? What needs do administrators and storytime providers have regarding assessment tools?”

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, and
- 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.

Time, or the lack of it, also presents a potential conflict between what is valued in terms of feedback methods and what is not valued. Are peer-to-peer interactions valued when they are informal and spontaneous? Is the information gained from those interactions, which take place often during other activities perhaps to maximize time spent, recognized as a form of assessment that provides professional development and improved practice?

Furthermore, when time is at a premium, is there a priority to inform and train all staff, even supervisors, on how to understand the object of the assessment well enough that they feel equipped to carry out the assessment?

Time is an investment that potentially must be made to develop an assessment process that feels authentic and informed and worthwhile for all parties involved. Administrators and storytime providers need time to develop and carry out an assessment process that will give them the pieces they need as far as advocacy materials and professional development feedback. Time is a need regarding the use of assessment tools, as well. Many of our interviewees mentioned wanting tools that are well developed and efficient so that observations can be done quickly and purposefully and yield effective feedback. This way, the individuals involved in the assessment can make the most of the time they have for the assessment and the information gained can be useful.

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.

Storytime providers need to understand from their administrators the goals of the library regarding storytimes and how those goals are a part of larger strategic goals for the library. Providers also need to see that assessment is a way of achieving those goals, and the information gained in that assessment is going to be used in a positive, constructive way.

Administrators then need to communicate those goals to providers and to the community, so that there is support and buy-in internally and externally for ongoing assessment, improvement, and collaboration around programming for young children at the library.

### **Section 3: Conclusion and Suggestions for Practice**

- What is the current landscape in terms of assessment of public library storytimes in Washington State?

Assessment of an informal learning space such as a public library storytime is necessarily complex and difficult to design. The four types of assessment that we address in this paper represent broad characterizations of how assessment is being designed and carried out in Washington State. No one solution fits all because of different needs, expectations, and goals in each library or library system.

At the same time, there is pressure on administrators and storytime providers alike to be able to advocate for the work they do and articulate benefit to and impact on the community. Furthermore, library staff face demands to deliver effective programming that has an impact on society. They need to know, for instance, what to measure in the

programs they offer and how to define the outcomes they set for those programs. Those outcomes may include:

- Increased attendance;
- Increased early learning opportunities;
- Increased recognition as leader in community for early learning.

Assessment has the potential to serve as a tool for advocacy to demonstrate the impact storytime can have on the learning of the children who attend. And that same assessment can serve as a professional development tool, enabling more informed conversations between providers and administrators about the practice of storytimes and establishing some standard effective practices for storytimes.

However, we found that assessment seems to shift in terms of regularity and complexity depending on where a library staff member is in their professional career. There seems to be a timeline to how assessment is taking place in order of decreasing assessment-related interactions.



In some libraries, when a storytime provider is first hired, it seems they receive structured mentoring and guidance in the form of observations by peers and supervisors during their first year or so. As providers gain experience, however, they may receive fewer and fewer structured observations. The annual review may therefore not be capturing in a holistic way the full impact a series of storytimes is having on a community, nor the growth a provider may experience during a year of providing storytimes. However, we also learned that storytime providers find many creative ways to reflect on and assess

their own practice and they seek out feedback from colleagues, supervisors, and parents/caregivers.

We also learned of some assessment processes that utilize the VIEWS2 tools and training to improve practice and build community. These processes are intended to build self-confidence, positive reinforcement, and constructive professional development—all of which were integral to the initial research intervention delivered during the second year of the VIEWS2 storytime study.

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.

#### **Section 4: Future Research**

This study represents an initial look into the landscape of public library storytime assessment in Washington State. There are several limitations to this research and potential areas for future research to build on these findings:

1. This study focused on libraries in Washington State in order to build on the work we did in the first two years of the study. Expanding this study to include other states, especially those with more structured assessment processes in place, would enable a wider, perhaps broader view of public library storytime assessment around the country.

2. A deeper investigation into a possible connection between assessment and advocacy would build on something we discovered in the interview responses but did not necessarily ask about in an overt fashion, potentially further strengthening the assessment process as a means for advocacy.
3. A content analysis of the formal tools libraries created for assessment might lead to a more in-depth understanding first of stakeholders needs and, second, whether the worksheets they've created are yielding the information they seek based on their needs.
4. Lastly, replicating the initial VIEWS2 storytime study methodology to test the research tools in an assessment process could identify strengths and weaknesses in the tools in their current form and lead to recommendations as to how they might be adapted for a library system's needs around storytime assessment.

## Appendix:

### Interview Protocols: Side-by-Side

ADM (Administrators') version:	STP (Storytime provider/Librarians') version:
<p><u>Introductory comments:</u></p> <p>Hello, my name is _____. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.</p> <p>*I'm going to ask a series of questions about storytimes and assessment of storytimes, and I want to thank you in advance for your candid responses.</p> <p>*We will record this interview and transcribe it for analysis. To protect everyone's identities, we plan to remove proper names during transcription. As we talk today, we would prefer to identify people by job role rather than name if possible.</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me before we begin?</p>	<p><u>Introductory comments:</u></p> <p>Hello, my name is _____. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.</p> <p>*I'm going to ask a series of questions about storytimes and assessment of storytimes, and I want to thank you in advance for your candid responses.</p> <p>*We will record this interview and transcribe it for analysis. To protect everyone's identities, we plan to remove proper names during transcription. As we talk today, we would prefer to identify people by job role rather than name if possible.</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me before we begin?</p>
<p><u>Section 1:</u></p> <p>Could you tell me about your position and responsibilities, particularly with regard to storytimes?</p> <p>--</p>	<p><u>Section 1:</u></p> <p>Could you tell me about your position and responsibilities, particularly with regard to storytimes?</p> <p>1.1) What types of activities do you usually include in your storytimes? Follow-up ask age ranges of children if not specified.</p> <p>1.2) There are many different types of early learning. Some that people have identified include science, math, physical health, social skills, etc. Do you think that you provide other types of early learning besides early literacy in your storytimes? If so, which one(s)?</p>
<p><u>Section 2:</u></p> <p>* The next section includes questions about required assessment. If you have any doubt about whether any practices at your library might count as "required assessment," don't hesitate to ask.</p> <p>2.1) Is your library [system] doing any</p>	<p><u>Section 2:</u></p> <p>* The next section includes questions about required assessment. If you have any doubt about whether any practices at your library might count as "required assessment," don't hesitate to ask.</p> <p>2.1) Is your library doing any required</p>

<p>required assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.2) If so, please tell me about it.</p> <p>2.3) How is it going, in your opinion? Please elaborate.</p> <p>2.4) What aspects of storytimes are being included in the required assessment?</p> <p>2.6) How is information from required storytime assessment being used in your library system?</p> <p>2.7) What benefits, if any, do you hope will (<i>or would</i>) come from required assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.8) What challenges, if any, have you faced regarding required assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p><u><i>If no to 2.1</i></u></p> <p>2.9) Do you see a need for required assessment?</p> <p>2.10) Why do you think required assessment is not needed?</p> <p>2.11) What benefits if any do you hope could come from required assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.12) What challenges, if any, might libraries face regarding required assessment of storytimes?</p>	<p>assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.2) If so, please tell me about it.</p> <p>2.3) How is it going, in your opinion? Please elaborate.</p> <p>2.4) What aspects of your storytimes are being included in the required assessment?</p> <p>2.5) What aspects of your storytimes are NOT being assessed?</p> <p>2.6) How is information from required storytime assessment being used in your library?</p> <p>2.7) What benefits, if any, do you hope will (<i>or would</i>) come from required assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.8) What challenges, if any, have you faced regarding required assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p><u><i>If no to 2.1</i></u></p> <p>2.9) Do you see a need for required assessment?</p> <p>2.10) Why do you think required assessment is not needed?</p> <p>2.11) What benefits if any do you hope could come from required assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>2.12) What challenges if any might libraries face regarding required assessment of storytimes?</p>
<p><u>Section 3:</u> *For this section, we want to ask you questions about informal assessment. We encourage you to think of informal assessment very broadly so as not to leave anything out. If you have any doubt about whether any practices at your library might count as “informal assessment,” don’t hesitate to ask.</p> <p>3.1) Some librarians are involved in informal assessment such as reflection on their storytimes or casually talking with a trusted</p>	<p><u>Section 3:</u> *For this section, we want to ask you questions about informal assessment. We encourage you to think of informal assessment very broadly so as not to leave anything out. If you have any doubt about whether any practices at your library might count as “informal assessment,” don’t hesitate to ask.</p> <p>3.1) Some librarians are involved in informal assessment such as reflection on your own storytimes or casually talking with a trusted</p>

<p>colleague. Do storytime providers at your library do any sorts of informal assessment?</p> <p>3.2) If so, please tell me about it.</p> <p>3.3) How is it going, in your opinion?</p> <p>3.4) What aspects of storytimes are being assessed informally?</p> <p>3.6) How is information from informal storytime assessment being used in your library?</p> <p>3.7) What benefits if any do you hope will (<i>or would</i>) come from informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.8) What challenges if any have you faced regarding informal assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p><u><i>If no to 3.1</i></u></p> <p>3.9) Do you see a need for informal assessment?</p> <p>3.10) Why do you think informal assessment is not needed?</p> <p>3.11) What benefits if any do you hope could come from informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.12) What challenges if any might libraries face regarding informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.15) (<i>If participant has not yet addressed</i>) How, if at all, does mentoring concerning storytimes happen in your library system now?</p>	<p>colleague. Do you or others at your library do any sorts of informal assessment?</p> <p>3.2) If so, please tell me about it.</p> <p>3.3) How is it going, in your opinion?</p> <p>3.4) What aspects of your storytimes are being assessed informally?</p> <p>3.5) What aspects of your storytimes are NOT being assessed?</p> <p>3.6) How is information from informal storytime assessment being used in your library?</p> <p>3.7) What benefits if any do you hope will (<i>or would</i>) come from informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.8) What challenges if any have you faced regarding informal assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p><u><i>If no to 3.1</i></u></p> <p>3.9) Do you see a need for informal assessment?</p> <p>3.10) Why do you think informal assessment is not needed?</p> <p>3.11) What benefits if any do you hope could come from informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.12) What challenges if any might libraries face regarding informal assessment of storytimes?</p> <p>3.13) How do you assess your own storytimes?</p> <p>3.14) How, if at all, does reflection concerning storytimes happen at your library now?</p> <p>3.15) How, if at all, does mentoring concerning storytimes happen at your library now?</p>
<p><u>Section 4: At about the 30-minute mark.</u> *In this section we want to ask specifically about assessment tools and how they are (or</p>	<p><u>Section 4: At about the 30-minute mark.</u> *In this section we want to ask specifically about assessment tools and how they are (or</p>



<p>could be) used at your library.</p> <p>4.1) What assessment tools, if any, are used in your library system?</p> <p>4.2) How are you using these assessment tools?</p> <p>4.3) How is it going, in your opinion?</p> <p>4.5) What challenges, if any, do you see with using existing tools for assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p>4.5s) What challenges, if any, do you see in developing tools for assessment of library storytimes?</p>	<p>could be) used at your library.</p> <p>4.1) What assessment tools are you using?</p> <p>4.2) How are you using these assessment tools?</p> <p>4.3) How is it going, in your opinion?</p> <p>4.4) (if they don't mention them earlier) Do you use the VIEWS2 tools for storytime assessment? What changes, if any, have you made or would you like to make to the VIEWS2 tools to facilitate assessment?</p> <p>4.5) What challenges, if any, do you see with using existing tools for assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p>What challenges, if any, do you see in developing tools for assessment of library storytimes?</p> <p>4.6) How, if at all, has the VIEWS2 training affected your practice?</p>
<p><u>Closing:</u></p> <p><i>5.1s) What do you want to know about storytime providers' job performance and evaluation with respect to storytimes?</i></p> <p>5.1) Is there a type of storytime assessment you think would be ideal to support you in you as a library administrator?</p> <p>How, if at all, is information about the quality or outcomes of storytimes communicated within your library system?</p> <p>5.2) What do you need in terms of being able to communicate the value of storytimes to library stakeholders?</p> <p>5.3) Is there anything else about assessment that you would like to share with us?</p> <p>5.4) Do you have any further questions or comments for us?</p> <p>Thank you...</p>	<p><u>Closing:</u></p> <p>5.1) Is there a type of assessment you think would be ideal to support you as a storytime provider?</p> <p>5.2) What do you need in terms of being able to communicate the value of storytimes to supervisors or other library stakeholders?</p> <p>5.3) Is there anything else about assessment that you would like to share with us?</p> <p>5.4) Do you have any further questions or comments for us?</p> <p>Thank you...</p>

