**Public Library Rhyme Times and the Seven Quality Principles toolkit: Evaluation Report**

An ASCEL initiated, Arts Council England Funded project to develop and test an evaluation tool using the seven quality principles to assess the impact of public library rhyme times.

**Introduction**

Rhyme times for babies and toddlers are offered in almost every public library in the country. In some libraries, there are several per week. They are usually free and they last approximately 30 minutes. They are delivered by library staff, volunteers and partners. They may include other activities but at their heart are parents, grandparents, carers and very young children learning, singing and sharing rhymes and sometimes simple stories together. They will include actions and sometimes props and/or musical instruments. Rhyme times are valued because they help language development and lay the foundations for early literacy; they support the development of motor skills and give carers, parents and children special time together. Rhyme times also give young children the experience of joining in a performance and learning to be in a shared cultural experience.

The [seven quality principles](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/quality-metrics/quality-principles) have been developed as a result of close collaboration between the Arts Council England (ACE) and arts and cultural organisations that work with children and young people. The aim of the quality principles work is to raise the standard of work being produced by, with and for children and young people.

The seven quality principles are:

1.Striving for excellence and innovation

2.Being authentic

3.Being exciting, inspiring and engaging

4.Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience

5.Actively involving children and young people

6.Enabling personal progression

7.Developing belonging and ownership

In 2016 Sarah Mears, then Chair of The Association of Senior Children and Education Librarians (ASCEL) attended an ACE Round Table on Early Years and discussed how the quality principles were being used by other arts and cultural organisations. Following the Round Table, she submitted a proposal to ACE on behalf of ASCEL who agreed to fund a project testing how the quality principles could be used to assess the impact of early years rhyme time activity in libraries.

**The project methodology was as follows:**

* Recruitment of Library Services who could work together to design, develop and test the final product. Library staff have long experience of delivering rhyme times and it was essential that the project was collaborative.
* Quality Principle training
* Identifying what quality looks like
* Creating the tools
* Seeking feedback
* Testing tools
* Feedback and revision
* Launch

1: Recruitment of library services

Library Services were recruited through a call out on the ASCEL network in early autumn 2016. Initially 14 Library Services volunteered to become involved. In the event 11 Library Services contributed to the whole project.

They were:

* Bexley and Bromley
* Cornwall
* Essex
* Gateshead
* Norfolk
* Plymouth
* St Helens
* Shropshire
* Tameside
* Warwickshire
* Worcestershire

In addition staff from Luton and Lambeth contributed to the WebEx and provided feedback

This gave us a strong mix of authorities and staff with a depth of knowledge and expertise.

2. Quality Principle training

The library staff participating had varying knowledge and understanding of the seven quality principles and so the project started with online (WebEx) training for all staff involved in November 2016. Ben Lee from Shared Intelligence delivered the training in two sessions with half the participants in each. It was very well received by those involved and had the additional outcome of building staff experience in a very different but cost effective type of training. The training also enabled people to share their initial ideas for the project, and the process was finalised following the WebEx event.

3. Identifying what quality looks like

The first task was to establish a baseline. We needed to agree what a quality rhyme time actually looked like. With the help of a very simple and open ended questionnaire, the team explored this with parents and carers attending their rhyme times; with other library staff and with their early years partners.

4. Creating the tools

Through the WebEx discussions and the outcomes of the initial survey, we settled on a toolkit which included a number of evaluation tools. This allows for triangulation of results, but also enables the toolkit to be used very flexibly as Library Services require. They can either:

* use just one tool
* choose one or more outcomes of rhyme times to test across all three tools or
* focus on specific quality principles across all three tools.

The toolkit comprises:

* *The framework itself* – this is the master document divided into six quality outcomes which were suggested by the initial feedback. Within each outcome, there are a number of quality statements mapped against the quality principles.
* *An observation schedule-* enabling staff to observe rhyme times and use the observations as part of an impact, training programme. The schedule is divided into 6 quality outcomes and mapped against the quality principles.
* *A family survey-* [ACE quality metrics](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/quality-metrics/quality-metrics#section-1) were used as the basis for the statements in this survey as well as taking inspiration from [The Reading Outcomes Framework](https://readingagency.org.uk/news/Outcomes%20Framework%20Toolkit_FINAL.pdf). The survey is divided into the 6 outcomes and mapped against the quality principles.
* *A session leader self-assessment questionnaire* - to help staff reflect on their practice. It is intended to be used in conjunction with the framework document as a development tool and for more structured staff development
* *Instruction sheet.*

5. Seeking feedback

Feedback was sought from the library services involved and also from Kelly Walsh, Head of Research and Impact at BookTrust. As a result amendments were made before the framework was tested.

5. Testing tools

During the summer term 2017 the tools were tested as follows.

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| Observation | Bexley and Bromley; Essex; Gateshead; Norfolk; St Helens; Shropshire; Tameside |
| Family survey | Cornwall; Norfolk; Plymouth; St Helens; Tameside; Warwickshire; Worcestershire |
| Session leader self-assessment | Bexley and Bromley; Essex; Norfolk; St Helens; Shropshire |

6. Feedback and revision

A final revision was made following the test, which included removing duplication, deleting or revising questions that didn't work and reducing the length of the staff self-assessment and the parent survey. We also removed the requirement for extensive comments (apart from one free text box) in the parent survey. This was in response to feedback from parents with active toddlers who do not have time (or free hands) for lengthy written feedback.

7. Launch

The tools will be launched at the ASCEL conference in November 2017 and then available via the ASCEL website.

**How the pilot Library Services responded to the tools**

1: Observation

This was arguably the most interesting element of the toolkit as it allowed library staff to view rhyme times dispassionately. It also requires the biggest investment in terms of staff capacity

The pilot authorities could choose to use the whole schedule or identify specific areas of focus. Essex and Norfolk worked together, observing each other’s rhyme times. This had the additional benefit of creating lasting contacts, sharing ideas and embedding new learning into rhyme time

"inspired by being in a different library, I shared things back in Essex and am putting ideas into rhyme time training.” Apryl, Essex

There are some challenges to achieving successful observation – session leaders may feel intimidated or threatened by being watched and parents may be equally uneasy. However the staff involved in this pilot dealt with this sensitively and generally found that staff viewed it positively.

Bexley and Bromley said it created an opportunity to go frontline and observe and discuss with staff. They reported that staff liked being part of the pilot. Beth from Norfolk said that "it really helped to energise and make those delivering sessions feel appreciated.”

Another Library Service said that the staff member delivering the rhyme time was nervous before hand “but I shared all the paperwork and explained to her that she was not been tested. Once the observation was done I went through this with her and she seemed more relaxed, and said she didn’t realise she did so much at the rhyme session. She felt I was testing her to begin with, but was happy with the end result.” Sarah, Tameside

Staff agreed that it was important to explain to parents why they were there, but then to be as unobtrusive as possible.

2: Family Survey

The family survey is divided into the six outcomes. Some of the Library Services asked parents to complete all sections. Others selected specific sections to explore. One service said it took some time to edit the survey, but allowed them to concentrate on target areas. Most parents found it easy to complete but suggested keeping mainly to scoring rather than asking families for too many comments.

3: Staff Self- assessment

Warwickshire said they will use the self- assessment regularly to support training for staff and said it was useful for seeing the gaps in provision. Shropshire said "pretty much all the staff agreed that the form had helped them think critically about the way they deliver rhyme time sessions and it highlighted areas of weakness that could be addressed in their personal action plan." They went on to say "we know we would be able to deliver a comprehensive training session if we covered all the area highlighted on the self -assessment form. Frances from Bexley and Bromley Libraries talked the assessment through with staff and said that it was useful for helping staff to explore the reasons behind the quality elements.

The pilot services are making changes based on their findings from the test of the tools.

“We’ve already started evaluating the observation sheets with the staff member following the sessions and inviting other rhyme time leaders to observe each other’s sessions has, shared good practice and led to discussion on improvements that can be easily incorporated.” Joanne, Gateshead

“Already making some changes based on ideas from the feedback – we are investing more in resources (bubbles, puppets, books), management are now taking a look at the sessions and talking with those running them more, and we will be developing further protocols to ensure consistent best practice (using children’s names, structured sessions, talking with parents more, etc.)” Beth, Norfolk

Kathryn from St Helens tested all three tools and presented a report to her management team based on her findings (attached as appendix 2)

**What we learned about rhyme times from this pilot**

Although the pilot project focused on developing the tools, we have received valuable feedback from parents and partners about the value of rhyme times. A selection of the comments have been mapped against the Quality Principles (see appendix 1)

In summary, the feedback received demonstrated that rhyme times in all their forms are highly popular and valued. Staff enthusiasm and the quality of delivery were really important to parents. The creative use of props and the welcoming environment were regularly highlighted; most families believe rhyme times to be a fantastic experience for children supporting cultural development and language building and involving children in creative activities - singing, dancing and actions. There were areas for development that were common to many services including consistency of the approach when different staff delivered rhyme times, helping parents to understand what difference rhymes make and why face to face rhymes are important and a more active promotion of book borrowing and sharing as part of the session. Parents really seemed to value rhyme times as a way of reducing their social isolation and this is an area where potentially more work could be done.

**Conclusion: Can the quality principles be used to assess rhyme times?**

Using the quality principles to identify quality outcomes has enabled us to develop a systematic approach to the creation of a rhyme time framework. Whilst the principles are predominantly around children and young people, we were generally able to adapt them for use with the parents and carers of the very young children. Many of the framework outcomes and statements demonstrated more than one principle and so flexibility will be required in using them depending on the audience’s interests and needs. It has also been important to make the framework as adaptable as possible so that it can be used across services with differing approaches. Testing the framework has revealed the high regard in which library rhyme times are held by the community and the value placed upon them. I hope that this framework will enable all Library Services to evaluate and continually improve their rhyme times and also that they will be able to use the evidence gathered for local advocacy and development of this very special cultural activity.

Sarah Mears, (ASCEL and SCL)

September 2017

**Appendix 1**

**Mapping feedback from parents and observations from staff against the Seven Quality Principles**

Nb – selected one quality principal for each quote but in practice some quotes demonstrate more than one quality principle

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| **1: Striving for excellence and innovation** |
| It has also really helped with me re learning the nursery rhymes/stories too which I had forgotten since my childhood |
| Full of joy and fun for both mums and tots |
| It’s a structured opportunity to come to the library |
| I meet other parents, grandparents where we have a chat after the session |
| New rhymes – we get printouts to learn them together |
| We enjoy looking at books before rhyme time |
| I look forward to coming to rhyme times. It’s essential to our Tuesdays |
| A chance to meet other mums and babies |
| Keep mammy happy, having somewhere to go and get out of the house |
| Getting parents to talk to each other |
| Observation Do staff recommend books to parents. Not formally during the session but at the end of the session Hannah engaged with a mum about children’s books and they discussed the books she had chosen. The books were beautifully shelved with lots of front facing books in the Bookstart area. Books were very inviting |
| Observation Hannah and Adam were excellent and very engaging, very natural , brilliant eye contact, brilliant facial expressions, fantastic rhythmic clapping, they worked very well as a double act and clearly enjoyed what they were doing – they varied standing up and sitting down, they made excellent and interesting animal sounds. The adults at the session were relaxed, had the unspoken permission to let go, have fun and join in with all the songs and rhymes |
| Observation They had a welcome song that included all the children by name, a final rhyme that they always use and a goodbye song. |
| **2: Being authentic** |
| The diversity of the group, families from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds mix in a friendly environment |
| Sometimes her 12 year old uncle likes to come too |
| Don’t have to book so don’t get tied down |
| Good eye contact addresses each child |
| Session leaders asks which rhymes we would like |
| We can always request rhymes usually towards the end of the session |
| Observation The session was held in the children’s library and chairs were laid out in a circle. Children had the opportunity to move freely around the large circle |
| Observation Do staff listen and respond to children’s comments, very flexible in content. One girl wanted to pick a puppet at the end after the session was starting to wind down, but accommodated her request. Authentic |
| **3: Being exciting, inspiring, engaging** |
| Takes a while for the children to participate i.e. months but once they learn the tunes, it’s fun, fun, fun |
| Every person that comes in front of parents/carers to do rhyme time brings their own personal touch to it, it does change when they are very happy and responsive and involved |
| We all love coming to storytimes. Heather is a fantastic leader at storytime and a big reason for why we continue to come |
| Poppy loves the songs, library atmosphere and group leaders |
| We sing some of the songs in the car on our way |
| Very relaxed happy atmosphere |
| Props used to stimulate the imagination and link to song |
| Some are very enthusiastic, some could be a bit enthusiastic |
| Des is a fantastic asset to the library and provides a really fun and friendly 30 mins which we look forward to every week thank you |
| Love it fun activities and cuddles |
| **4: Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience** |
| Helps me practise English and have fun with my little boy |
| It is a bit daunting at first. Everyone is friendly |
| Always encouraged to come into the circle and join in –very welcoming |
| Feel welcomed first time – gave lots of encouragement |
| Easy access to changing room for nappy changing – not have to wait for the key |
| Observation Are all participants greeted on arrival? The member of staff made time to talk to everyone before the start of the session and welcomes a new family at the start of the session. Being authentic |
| Observation Are parents encouraged to sit with children? There were 30 chairs laid out however whilst parents started on the chairs holding their children, they naturally gravitated towards the floor, so that by the end of the session, all the parents and children (with the exception of 1) were sitting on the floor |
| Observation Half way through instrument box was brought out to squeals of joy. 2 songs then very noisy section which was an excellent combo of chaos and silence. One lovely point where an older sibling was helping their young brother with movements |
| Observation Is there a face to face rhyme? Row Row Row Your Boat clearly invited to be face to face. Fantastic response from parents particularly one dad who had not engaged at all until this song |
| **5: Actively involving children and young people** |
| They learn a lot of things, to share, to sign, to dance, to play with other children |
| We are encouraged to join in with singing and actions |
| My child loves the hokey kokey which she asks for often |
| Some staff let children play with props others do not |
| There are always enough props for every child and parents. They are always clean |
| **6: Enabling personal progression** |
| It provides a fantastic opportunity for children to develop a wide range of skills. My son’s verbal skills have been hugely developed through songs and music. He has also developed his social skills by playing with other children, his motor skills through actions and using musical instruments |
| Moreover they start to love books which is very important for the future |
| Enjoy watching our babies grow and get excited at the songs |
| I have been bringing my son (now nearly 2) since he was only a few months old. He loves songs and books. This has been recognised in nursery etc. |
| I believe it has encouraged his learning and development |
| Imogen is becoming really confident and social and it’s down to her coming to rhyme time sessions |
| As they sing they can remember words and pronunciation |
| Yes child shy at first but not now |
| Repeat songs at home |
| Pretends to read stories (in answer to I borrow books for my child) |
| She learned the words to each song before she started to properly speak |
| Makes a good interaction between child and parent |
| He really responds to the songs and we can enjoy them together |
| Quality time to interact rather than do jobs etc. |
| I feel my child’s confidence has increased a lot – he now enjoys coming to the library and smiles when I tell him we are going there |
| Speech seemed to develop dramatically after attending rhyme time. Repeating words and actions from a young age |
| Yes Louie loves to dance and sing and join in with the actions of the rhymes |
| Yes we do Row Row Your Boat etc. then at home we do all the rhymes facing each other |
| Like the fact that each song is done twice so children recognise them |
| Observation Sometimes the rhyme would be spoken first. Every one was repeated at least twice to allow people to first catch the tune then fully join in |
| Observation The lead song was wind the bobbin up. I had a parent and child next to me (Annie 9 months) and she had her hands ready for clapping so this was clearly recognised by her as the start |
| **7: Developing belonging and ownership** |
| So parents feel safe and comfortable about coming to the library at other times |
| Met some lovely parents |
| My child enjoys being around other children |
| We are informed if there are other library related sessions happening |
| We love our library and rhyme times is what introduced us to the library |
| Have a lot of mummy friends through rhyme time |
| Every week we come along and see familiar faces here |
| Familiar environment now he’s excited to come |
| Can be hard to strike up a conversation sometimes but I have made one friend |
| Met lots of other mums here. It is a valuable network for us |
| Get to know other parents/carers – Yes I have met parents and grandparents and a German lady met me in a shop and gave me her phone number |
| There are not many free activities when children get an opportunity to socialise |
| My baby really enjoys it and loves seeing other children |
| The group in itself provides the children great opportunities to learn and interact with others |
| A chance for parents/carers to mix afterwards and choose books – it’s nice not to be rushed out |

**Appendix 2**

**Rhyme Time Assessments in Libraries report for Cluster Team July 2017 St Helens Libraries**

I have assessed 12 libraries during June and July. I couldn’t assess Central due to the current closure. I am encouraged by my observations. St Helens Libraries Read and Rhyme times are clearly demonstrating the following quality principles:

Arts Council England Seven Quality Principles for work by, with and for children and young people.

1. Striving for excellence and innovation

2. Being authentic

3. Being exciting, inspiring and engaging

4. Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience

5. Actively involving children and young people

6. Enabling personal progression

7. Developing belonging and ownership

Where we do well:

• Sessions clearly delivered and are exciting and fun

• Modelling action rhymes

• Including all children and knowing their names

• Listening to and responding to children

• Good range of rhymes

• Stories incorporated into each session

• Use of musical instruments and props so that children participate

• Warm welcome to families

• Chatting to families beginning/end of session

• Use of space – Grand Old Duke

Whilst the sessions on the whole are good to excellent, there are some issues and the following points should be addressed by managers working with staff who are delivering the sessions.

Where we need to improve

• Lack of name introduction

• Encouraging book borrowing

• Recommending books

• Incorporating new rhymes/new books – Zoom Song

• Child choice

• Managing big groups

• Managing parents

• Encouraging parents to join in

• Ensuring parents know the importance of listening to stories

• Structuring the session

• Incorporating stay and play

• Signposting to other events

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