

Ahoy there, Captain! Pirates, Puppets and Reading Through Play

An Evaluation of Little Angel Theatre's 'Reading Through Play' Initiative, based on Charlie Cook's Favourite Book



Photo by Suzi Corker, featuring facilitators Cathy Walker and Carys Williams

Workshop developed by Little Angel Theatre

Resources designed by National Literacy Trust and Little Angel Theatre

Books provided by Macmillan Children's Books

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Introduction

Funded by Arts Council England, Little Angel Theatre's nationwide 'Reading Through Play' initiative, offered free facilitated workshops for children aged 4-7 in schools and libraries across England from June to December 2024. The workshops were inspired by LAT's touring production of *Charlie Cook's Favourite Book*, based on the story by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Workshops were complemented by resources developed alongside the National Literacy Trust, designed to support teachers in their planning and further exploring picture books. This report examines the impact of the project on children, teachers, and parents/carers focusing on the key objectives of the project which were to use drama and puppetry to enhance young children's enjoyment of reading and support key literacy skills.

What prompted the project?

Research highlights the critical role of pleasurable reading experiences in fostering children's confidence, interest in texts, and overall reading competence, leading to better reading outcomes. A strong link exists between children's enjoyment of reading and their success in developing reading skills (OECD, 2011; Cremin & Scholes, 2024).

However, in the UK, children’s enjoyment of reading is in decline. The National Literacy Trust’s (NLT) 2024 survey reveals that only 34.6% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoy reading during their free time—the lowest level since the survey began—marking an 8.8% drop in one year. Similarly, BookTrust’s 2024 findings show that while 33% of seven-year-olds report loving reading, this figure falls to 25% by the end of primary school. Despite UK children achieving above-average reading performance internationally, their enjoyment ranks in the bottom third.

Teachers have expressed increasing concerns about this trend, with nearly half of Early Years and Key Stage 1 educators worried about reading enjoyment levels, rising to 63% among Key Stage 2 teachers. This decline in reading enjoyment poses heightened risks for disadvantaged children, who face fewer opportunities to access resources and events promoting positive reading experiences. BookTrust emphasizes the need to support children from low-income families in enjoying reading during school hours to address the widening attainment gap.

Organizations like LAT, which collaborate with schools and communities, can play a pivotal role in reversing this trend. By creating engaging reading activities, particularly for disadvantaged children, they can help reignite enthusiasm for books and address the growing attainment gap.

What did the project involve?

LAT staff designed the workshop activities to include a variety of interactive and collaborative tasks aimed at encouraging the creative agency of the children. These activities were aligned with the Key Stage 1 English Curriculum. The workshops began with an interactive reading of the book, followed by a series of drama games, storytelling exercises, and transformative puppet-making using everyday household objects. Two facilitators, one portraying a pirate and the other playing Polly the pirate puppet, guided and engaged the children who were free to choose how they wished to participate. The goal was for the children to become part of the story by inhabiting characters and exploring narratives through movement, sound, and imagination. At the end of the workshops, the children were reintroduced to the book and given a copy to take home.

The facilitators had experience in both acting and working in school settings. They travelled across the UK, delivering **182 workshops** to Reception and Key Stage 1 classes across **60 schools and 24 libraries**, many of which were located in disadvantaged areas targeting schools with high numbers of children eligible for free school meals.



Below is a table summarizing the project’s final engagement numbers:

TOTAL		SCHOOLS		LIBRARIES	
Workshops	182	Workshops	140	Workshops	38
Locations	84	Locations	60	Locations	24
Children	4156	Pupils	3653	Children	503
Adults	630	Teachers	298	Parents/Carers	332

Following the workshops, teachers were given access to additional resources on The National Literacy Trust (NLT) website. These resources included a complementary learning sequence of book-based and drama activities designed to encourage reading for pleasure through play and drama-based responses. The materials aimed to support children in exploring, interpreting, and responding to a picture book through a variety of teaching approaches, including games, drama, and puppetry (NLT, n.d.). As of March 2025, there were **866 views** of the webpage and **171 downloads** of the resource itself.

How did we find out about the effectiveness of the project?

An extensive evaluation ran alongside the project which combined quantitative and qualitative methods of data capture together with reflective and observational practices to ensure a holistic evaluation of the workshops' outcomes. The approach ensured comprehensive insights from various stakeholders involved in the workshops.

Below is a table summarizing the data collection methods used for the evaluation:

Data Source	Number of Respondents /Participants	Focus Areas	Format
Teacher Questionnaires	132	Children’s engagement, literacy development, and teachers’ confidence in puppetry (before and after workshops).	Semi-structured questionnaires
Parent/Carer Questionnaires	69	Children’s engagement, learning about books, home-based drama/puppetry, and confidence.	Semi-structured questionnaires
Facilitator Reflections	86	Effectiveness of activities, necessary adjustments, and feedback from children and adults.	Semi-structured questionnaires and reflective notes
Workshop Observations	15 (randomly selected)	Children’s involvement levels and multimodal responses during workshops.	Narrative observations and Laevers Involvement Scale *

Teacher Interviews	3	Follow-up interviews to discuss workshop outcomes and impacts.	Semi-structured interviews
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* Ferre Laevers (Ed.) (2005) *Well-being and Involvement in Care Settings. A Process-oriented Self-evaluation Instrument*, Research Centre for Experiential Education, Leuven University.

What did we learn?

The analysis below showcases the impact of the workshops on fostering engagement, accessibility, and child and adult learning. The discussion includes statistical evidence, direct quotes, and illustrations of practice to provide a comprehensive understanding of the workshops' outcomes. Barriers and limitations faced by the participants and facilitators are also considered.

Four interlinking themes have been identified and discussed:

1. Children's Engagement;
2. Literacy Development and Reading Enjoyment;
3. Inclusion;
4. Teacher and Parent/Carer Learning

1. Children's Engagement

'Absolutely AMAZING! The class are a challenging cohort yet they were all engaged and enjoying the workshop. I can't wait to see the writing the children produce from this! Thank you so much! You've left both staff and children inspired!'

Children's engagement was overwhelmingly positive. Parent/carers feedback from the library sessions consistently emphasised how the workshops created an interactive environment that drew children into the storytelling experience. 87% of parent/carers felt that their children were engaged at a high level throughout the workshops.

One parent said, 'My son aged 7 is not normally interested in attending / joining in. He was super engaged in this workshop. He joined in every part and really enjoyed it.'

Another said that, 'The facilitators were very engaging and enthusiastic. They encouraged all children to take part.'

There was also multi-generational appeal as the library workshops seemed to appeal to both children and adults. Comments suggest the experiences were fun and emotionally connective for entire families, 'I'm 47 and loved it just as much'.

Teachers reported that 95.5% of their children engaged with and enjoyed the workshops with many reflecting on the quality of interaction between the facilitators and the children to enable that engagement.

One said, 'You had engagement from pupils who don't usually participate which was fab to see' and another said that it was 'engaging for all learners – especially a class like mine with attention difficulties'.

It is important to recognise that while positive engagement was observed by teachers and parent/carers, the quality could vary. However, the involvement levels measured of children in both library and school workshops (see table to methods) showed a sustained level of engagement. 11 out of the 15 children selected, fitted into the category of 'high levels' where children's activity had intense moments and were not easily distracted, or 'extremely high levels' where children were persistently intensely involved, concentrating, creative, and energetic.

In all of the measures the activities that were most engaging for children were ones where they were highly active with their bodies and minds, either making and moving puppets or using their imagination during dramatic encounters and games. One said, 'I loved it when Polly popped up.' More passive activities: watching/listening to the facilitators and looking at the book, were less engaging for the children.

One child expressed it this way,

'I liked being the pirate best. Making puppets was fun. I like doing the sea creatures and putting them in the sea and my best bit was walking the plank as you could stand up and jump in'

Evidence also showed that after the workshops children were enthused to make their own puppets, one child asked, 'Can I make my own Jellyfish puppet at home with a Morrisons bag 'cause me Mam doesn't have purpley ones?'

2. Literacy and Reading Enjoyment

'When I go to school again I'm going to get the big book and read it and make everyone play pirates'

Enthusiasm for Reading

The workshops successfully nurtured a love for books among children, emphasizing the joy of storytelling and imaginative play. Teachers frequently commented on how sessions enhanced childrens' enthusiasm for reading.

One teacher reflected, 'The session was so helpful for their reading and encouraging them to love it.' Another teacher noted that even reluctant readers showed heightened interest in reading, particularly when the children were asked to share the book with a friend at the end of the workshop.

This was also observed by facilitators, one remarked, ‘The children LOVE reading the book, and it is so satisfying to see them engaged with reading.’

Inviting Multisensory experiences

Interactive storytelling techniques, such as using props, puppets, and soundscapes, were pivotal in captivating children. Facilitators utilised sea-themed props like Polly the Parrot and a treasure chest, which delighted the children.

Activities such as the ‘storm soundscape’, where children mimicked storm noises, and ‘walking the plank’, a participatory game, fostered their creative engagement, helping to bridge the gap between play and literacy.

These creative methods also supported multisensory learning. Soundscapes recreated with alliterative words like ‘whoosh’ and ‘crash’ heightened comprehension. Hands-on props promoted touch while activities like mimicking a pirate’s walk helped children to explore physical movement and space. The workshops’ diversity of materials and use of different storytelling spaces enabled each child to find an avenue to connect with the story.

Development of Literacy Skills

Teachers were able to identify a wide range of literacy skills being built during the workshops.

They noticed opportunities for children to speak and listen and express their ideas through oral rehearsal, explanation of vocabulary (e.g. mutiny) and descriptive vocabulary building (e.g. scuttle). The children also told stories from pictures, expressed ideas through movement, tried out voices in role, recalled events, extended sentences and listened to the story itself at multiple points.

Understanding how stories work was a strong feature within the workshops as children were encouraged to make predictions, follow a sequence, understand story themes, make links to storytelling traditions, visualise characters, engage in scene setting, retell through actions, understand character motivation, create dialogue, and develop puppetry skills. One teacher felt that ‘Children found the magic in role-play through active movement.’ And emotional expression was observed by both teachers and facilitators during activities like the storm sequence – this promoted a deeper connection with the story.

Reading skills were supported through children’s immersion in the story and there were opportunities to make links between books and their own life experiences. Word recognition, comprehension of text (answering text-based questions), phonic recognition, using the illustrations as cues all emerged through the drama. One teacher felt that this, ‘Brought reading alive’, another that it enabled ‘Enjoyment of story, no matter what reading level’.

Teachers also noticed an increase in children’s general dispositions that can help them to become confident readers; their concentration, imagination and creativity, and understanding of feelings and emotions.

Addressing Barriers to Literacy

Workshops incorporated strategies to overcome barriers like language proficiency and confidence. For example, facilitators used visual aids and interactive reading to engage children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Teachers observed that even non-verbal students actively participated, demonstrating the workshops' inclusivity.

Feedback included statements like, ‘This was a great opportunity for our children, especially those who struggle with traditional methods of learning.’

In one instance, a library workshop involved children from multilingual backgrounds. By integrating props and gestures, facilitators communicated complex ideas effectively, ensuring every participant could contribute.

One parent noted, ‘My child rarely feels confident speaking up in groups, but today they shared their ideas with pride.’ Such feedback highlights the workshops’ role in breaking down language barriers and fostering self-expression.

Barriers and Limitations

While the workshops successfully fostered a love for books, challenges did emerge.

There was inconsistent preparation among participating schools. In some cases, children were unfamiliar with the featured books, which hindered initial engagement. Teachers who prepared children in advance, by introducing the book or its themes, before reported higher levels of participation.

3. Inclusion

‘My son is autistic and wouldn't usually want to stay for activities like this. But he really engaged with this so thank you. It's been amazing to watch my son be so interactive!’

Accommodating Diverse Needs

Inclusion was a core ingredient of the workshops, with activities meeting a range of sensory, educational, and behavioural needs. For instance, a child with severe ADHD, who initially struggled, became an active participant after being given a small task—organising puppets. One teacher noted, ‘It’s rare to get the whole class engaged, especially students with additional needs, but they were all focused and participating together.’

The range of activities helped children with diverse needs to find a way into the dramatic play, for example there were quieter activities for children with sensory sensitivities and visual and tactile resources, like soft seaweed props, supported engagement for children with sensory processing challenges. Most activities were open-ended and adjustments could be made. Children were invited into the play when and how, they wanted to. This enabled their individual interests to be responded to, and children with EAL, SEND and varying levels of literacy to be included.

Strategies where larger groups of children were broken into smaller teams with adults assigned to them ensured that every child could receive adequate attention. This approach allowed facilitators to address individual needs while maintaining overall group dynamics. One facilitator shared that, 'by dividing the class into smaller circles for the treasure chest activity, we noticed an improvement in focus and participation.'

The dynamic between the facilitators was also crucial, with both playing distinct roles in maintaining order and ensuring smooth transitions between activities. Their feedback highlights the challenge of managing children's energy levels and maintaining focus throughout the workshop. Techniques such as using key buzzwords, e.g., 'freeze', and tailoring the length and pace of the sessions were highlighted as a way to keep children engaged, particularly when dealing with high-energy moments like the 'storm' sequence or puppet activities.

Building Inclusive Environments

The workshops fostered a sense of belonging through group activities such as role-playing and shared storytelling. Peer-led support emerged as a valuable tool; children often helped one another sound out words or complete tasks. For example, in one activity, children collaborated to 'dig for treasure', developing a shared narrative.

Creating a welcoming atmosphere also contributed to inclusivity. Facilitators often began sessions with icebreakers, inviting children to name their favourite book. These activities helped children feel comfortable and connected. Facilitators applied their skills as interactive communicators to include those children who were sometimes reluctant to participate. As one teacher put it, 'it was especially lovely to see the correctly measured interaction with the child who finds it tricky at the moment to access learning. He was happy and involved'.

During one session, a child with ADHD transitioned from being carried into the room to sitting attentively at the front, hand raised to answer questions. This was achieved by engaging the child on their level and assigning them a task related to the activity. The teacher described this transformation as a 'real accomplishment'.

There were some logistical challenges for facilitators in managing diverse needs in large groups or working in noisy environments, however facilitators made efforts to overcome these.

Barriers to Inclusion

While many successes were observed, inclusion posed significant challenges in some schools with environmental factors playing the most significant role. Noise from adjacent spaces, such as dining halls or other classrooms, sometimes disrupted sessions. This was particularly challenging for children with sensory sensitivities, who found it difficult to focus amidst external distractions.

Logistical issues such as delayed starts, late arrivals, and interruptions due to external factors (like sports day) required flexibility from the facilitators. Sometimes 90-minute sessions were too long, especially for younger children as they lost focus toward the end, and shorter sessions (around 60 minutes) were more successful.

Additionally, the levels of involvement of staff helping to support children's engagement during the school workshops was varied. Higher levels of engagement from children in schools were observed where there were proactive staff who collaborated closely and intervened when needed. Similarly, in libraries where parent/carers were more involved with the workshop activities the children appeared more involved.

During library workshops where families or childminders attended some of the children involved were too young to participate fully and older children may not have gained as much learning from the workshops than was intended. However, babies on laps were observed being encouraged by their parent/carers to focus on the puppets and older children enjoyed taking part as well.

4. Teacher and Parent/Carer Learning

'You've given me so many ideas for using drama in KS1'
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Enhancing Teaching Practices

The workshops provided professional development opportunities for teachers, showcasing innovative methods to engage children in literacy learning. Many teachers expressed appreciation for storytelling strategies such as using puppets and drama. One remarked, 'The session inspired us to find new ways to make reading enjoyable'. Another commented, 'Puppets are rarely used in school but this workshop highlighted their value'.

Teacher's expressed a 64% improvement in confidence in using drama or puppetry to support literacy learning after the workshops with 93% planning to incorporate more puppetry into their every-day practice. They also recognised the creative opportunities of reusing everyday objects and materials. Enthusiasm was expressed by teachers in future engagement with drama and puppetry with one teaching saying, 'I can't wait to go home and buy myself some garden glove crabs!'

The teachers were also motivated to extend children's imaginative storytelling by using props, having treasure boxes, introducing games, using improvisation, and encouraging

children act out stories and move more freely. 93% of the teachers also plan to access the NLT resources to enhance their planning.

Teachers also saw their own practices reflected in specific workshop features, such as soundscapes and peer collaboration, reinforcing their potential. One Year 1 teacher shared, 'We've started using soundscapes in our storytelling lessons, and the children love it'.

Teachers have also benefitted from the modelling of high-quality interaction with children by the workshop facilitators — they recognised that this produced high levels of inclusion. They felt encouraged to emulate these participatory techniques in order to develop more effective support for children with SEND and/or communication and language challenges.

Enhancing family reading

Facilitators encouraged adult involvement in many of the activities, like walking the plank and book sharing, in order to encourage the children to participate. One parent's involvement helped their shy child overcome hesitation and another who shared after joining in, 'I didn't realise how much storytelling could help build my child's confidence and imagination.' The impact of this is summed up by one facilitator reflecting that, 'When parents get involved children's engagement increases'.

The idea that stories or books can 'come alive' was picked up by a number of families with one carer saying that 'books can take you on amazing adventures'. There was a 55% increase in parent/carers confidence in using drama and puppets to explore picture books with children after taking part in a workshop. Parents and carers recognised that reading can create emotional connection and be a pleasurable experience. They repeatedly described the workshops as 'fun, brilliant, and enjoyable'.

Many parent/carers indicated that they would like to use and make more puppets at home using everyday objects with their children. They planned to make more sound effects and funny voices when they read stories and discuss the feelings of characters. Additionally, parent/carers felt they had gained practical tools to support literacy at home, for example how everyday objects could be used. One carer remarked, 'I will be using household items to act out stories — it will make reading time so much more fun'.

Barriers to Teacher and Parent/Carer Learning

Several limitations emerged in fostering teacher and parent/carers learning. For teachers, a potential lack of time to bring these techniques into the classroom may limit their long-term integration of the workshop techniques. One teacher also noted the need to build further professional knowledge, 'We'd love more resources or follow-up sessions, to deepen our understanding'.

Parent and carer engagement in the libraries, while high in some workshops, was inconsistent. In some cases, parent/carers were hesitant to participate, either due to cultural norms or discomfort with group activities. Facilitators observed that proactive encouragement—such as inviting specific parent/carers to model activities—helped alleviate this barrier.

Teachers too were sometimes hesitant to participate and on one occasion absent altogether. This significantly impacted on the workshop's flow and effectiveness. When the teachers actively engaged, the children responded much better and the sessions were more effective.

Adults attending library sessions highlighted the need for more workshops with better advertisement to entice more families in.

Conclusion

The 'Reading Through Play' initiative was the Little Angel's Theatre's first large-scale nationwide project. The workshops reached 60 schools and 24 libraries, many in disadvantaged areas providing drama and puppet play to children who may have limited experience and access to theatre.

The workshops were effective at providing an interactive multi-sensory approach to reading. The facilitators engaged children's entire beings in the storytelling process by incorporating physical movement, drama, puppetry, and sound. Children were not just reading about pirates or sea creatures; they were walking the plank, creating storm sounds, and bringing characters to life. This holistic approach transformed reading from a potentially solitary, static activity into a dynamic, collaborative experience. Children were immersed in rich language experiences that expanded their literacy skills, introduced new vocabulary, helped them to develop narrative comprehension, and fostered an emotional connection to books. They learned that books are not static objects, but living, breathing worlds waiting to be explored.

The inclusive qualities of the workshops were inspiring for teachers and impressive for parent/carers. This was as a result of the diverse multisensory symbolic play activities, the skills of the facilitators interaction with the children, and their responsiveness to their varied needs. Teachers and parent/carers understanding of the potential for puppetry and drama in supporting reading development increased. Adult participants expressed a desire to emulate or adapt the workshop activities at school and home. They also hoped for further LAT workshops in the future.

Overall, through this initiative children learned that books are not static objects, but living, breathing worlds waiting to be explored. They discovered that reading is an adventure, a form of play, and a powerful tool for understanding themselves and the world around them. One child poignantly summarised this up by asking, 'Can we make games from stories every day now?'

Recommendations:

1. **Continue to roll-out workshops:** Build on national networks and plan further innovative opportunities to bring puppetry, drama and story-telling into children's lives.

2. **Teacher development and training:** Provide training for educators on drama and puppet play to support communication, language and literacy, and how to build inclusive practices in schools.
3. **Provide flexible formats and optimise the environment:** Similar projects should consider shorter workshops for younger children and request that schools/libraries prioritise quieter, dedicated spaces with an understanding of the types of activities the children will be engaged in.
4. **Communicate and prepare fully:** Ensure that there is effective communication before the sessions with educators and parent/carers so that they understand the importance of their participation and enhance overall readiness.
5. **Reflect and Evaluate:** Select effective ways to evaluate further LAT community activities in order to refine their effectiveness.

References

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