NYCT Bridges to Literacy
Data Report
Rob Horowitz
Elizabeth Beaubrun
June 2025

During the 2024-2025 school year, we collected and analyzed data on the New York Community Trust *Bridges to Literacy* Program, implemented by ArtsConnection. Data sources included:

- Winter and spring teacher surveys (n = 31)
- Classroom observations (12 classes in 4 site visits)
- Observation of teacher professional development
- Review of program materials
- ArtsConnection observation logs

This report presented data collected through June 2025, specifically highlighting survey and classroom observation data.

Teacher Surveys

Teachers responded to surveys in October 2024 and March 2025. The surveys contained rating scales on achievement in student literacy, puppetry arts, and the teachers' own professional development. We used a 5-point scale (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). There were marked increases in every category from October to March.

The following tables show frequency results for each survey administration and tables comparing differences in average scores.

Teachers reported increases in their own ability to develop literacy curricula, integrate puppetry arts with literacy, and identify evidence of student achievement in English Language Arts.

Literacy and Teacher Professional Development – October 2024	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am experienced in developing literacy curricula.	8.7%	60.9%	13%	17.4%	0%
I am experienced in integrating the puppetry arts with literacy in my classroom.	4.3%	26.1%	30.4%	39.1%	0%
I can identify evidence of student achievement in ELA.	30.4%	65.2%	4.3%	0%	0%

Literacy and Teacher Professional Development – March 2025	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am experienced in developing literacy curricula.	50%	25%	0%	25%	0%
I am experienced in integrating the puppetry arts with literacy in my classroom.	25%	50%	0%	25%	0%
I can identify evidence of student achievement in ELA.	62.5%	37.5%	0%	0%	0%

We obtained mean, or average, scores for each rating scale. Because we used a 5-point scale, the mean scores could range from 1 to 5. The following table shows the increases from October to March for each literacy professional development scale.

Literacy and Teacher Professional Development – Mean Scores	October	March
I am experienced in developing literacy curricula.	3.61	4.00
I am experienced in integrating the puppetry arts with literacy in my classroom.	2.96	3.75
I can identify evidence of student achievement in ELA.	4.26	4.63

Teachers reported increases in their ability to understand thinking and expression in puppetry arts and identify puppetry practices that support thinking and expression. They learned to describe student learning behaviors in visual arts and theater and reported developing their skill at identifying evidence of achievement in puppetry arts.

Puppetry Arts and Teacher Professional Development – October 2024	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am familiar with different kinds of thinking and expression embedded in the puppetry arts.	4.3%	30.4%	43.5%	21.7%	0%
I can identify practices in the puppetry arts that support children's thinking and expression.	0%	43.5%	43.5%	13%	0%
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in visual arts.	13%	34.8%	34.8%	17.4%	0%
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in theater.	8.7%	26.1%	43.5%	21.7%	0%
I can identify evidence of student achievement in the puppetry arts.	8.7%	47.8%	34.8%	8.7%	0%

Puppetry Arts and Teacher Professional Development – March 2025	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am familiar with different kinds of thinking and expression embedded in the puppetry arts.	12.5%	75%	0%	12.5%	0%
I can identify practices in the puppetry arts that support children's thinking and expression.	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in visual arts.	12.5%	87.5%	0%	0%	0%
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in theater.	25%	62.5%	12.5%	0%	0%
I can identify evidence of student achievement in the puppetry arts.	12.5%	75%	12.5%	0%	0%

The following table shows the increases from October to March for each puppetry professional development scale.

Puppetry Arts and Teacher Professional Development – Mean Scores	October	March
I am familiar with different kinds of thinking and expression embedded in the puppetry arts.	3.17	3.88
I can identify practices in the puppetry arts that support children's thinking and expression.	3.30	4.25
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in visual arts.	3.43	4.13
I can describe in detail student learning behaviors in theater.	3.22	4.13
I can identify evidence of student achievement in the puppetry arts.	3.57	4.00

Teachers reported improvement in student literacy. Students were better able to recognize and use English, match sounds with written symbols, read with improved accuracy and expression, better comprehend written text, and find connections between written text and aspects of their own lives.

Student Literacy – October 2024	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My students have the ability to recognize, identify and use spoken English sounds.	4.3%	56.5%	8.7%	30.4%	0%
My students have the ability to match sounds with written symbols, such as letters.	4.3%	43.5%	8.7%	43.5%	0%
My students have the ability to read with accuracy and expression.	0%	21.7%	17.4%	47.8%	13%
My students can comprehend the overall meaning of written text.	0%	30.4%	8.7%	60.9%	0%
My students can find connections between written text and aspects of their own life.	0%	47.8%	26.1%	26.1%	0%
My students can use words to create an image in their mind whether an illustration exists or not.	0%	39.1%	17.4%	34.8%	8.7%

Student Literacy – March 2025	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My students have the ability to recognize, identify and use spoken English sounds.	12.5%	75%	0%	12.5%	0%
My students have the ability to match sounds with written symbols, such as letters.	12.5%	62.5%	0%	25%	0%
My students have the ability to read with accuracy and expression.	12.5%	37.5%	12.5%	37.5%	0%
My students can comprehend the overall meaning of written text.	12.5%	50%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%
My students can find connections between written text and aspects of their own life.	12.5%	75%	0%	12.5%	0%
My students can use words to create an image in their mind whether an illustration exists or not.	12.5%	37.5%	25%	25%	0%

Teachers observed improvement in student literacy from October to March.

Student Literacy – Mean Scores	October	March
My students have the ability to recognize, identify and use spoken English sounds.	3.35	3.88
My students have the ability to match sounds with written symbols, such as letters.	3.09	3.63
My students have the ability to read with accuracy and expression.	2.48	3.25
My students can comprehend the overall meaning of written text.	2.70	3.38
My students can find connections between written text and aspects of their own life.	3.22	3.88
My students can use words to create an image in their mind whether an illustration exists or not.	2.87	3.38

Several teachers described some prior experiences with integrating theater arts and puppetry arts with ELA.

- *I have used Readers Theater in my room.*
- *In my former school, the arts were incorporated with paint, bingo marker, thicker pencils and floor usage. We also had a sensory garden and gym.*
- *Last year we did puppetry in my first grade class.*
- *I had one year of experience with the Bridges program using puppetry arts with ELA. Children used vocabulary describing what they were doing, shapes they were making. We discussed creating settings and used action words.*

Teachers described the most successful aspects of their integration of theater arts and puppetry with ELA.

- *It has been helpful working with the teaching artist to develop puppetry and arts with my students. It has been exciting to give my students more of an opportunity to use their imagination to incorporate puppetry in their learning.*
- *I think the best part of it is when there were actual lessons such as problem and solution, setting, characters and retell. I think that explicitly teaching these things will help students connect during ELA time.*
- *Most successful was giving students the vocabulary to describe settings and characters in a way they could not do before.*
- *Students were very engaged when creating their puppets and then creating stories with their puppets. The learning was organized and I thought it was very helpful that skills and anchor charts from our reading curriculum were used during lessons.*

- *Students enjoyed making their puppets and settings. They were able to come up with their own folktale with their character and a setting to go along with it.*
- *One of the most successful initiatives was our "Puppet Show Project," where students created their own puppets based on characters from the stories we read in class. This hands-on experience not only deepened their comprehension of the texts but also encouraged creativity and collaboration among peers.*
- *It was a really good experience. Students enjoyed it.*

Teachers reported how their students were engaged in improving in communicating their own ideas and interests. They successfully collaborated with their peers on developing their expressive abilities.

- *Students were able to work in groups and with teachers to create stories and worlds that went along with their art.*
- *Students are participating more, showing enthusiasm and working with their peers.*
- *The students were very excited to be imaginative while creating their puppets and using their puppets to create a story. Students loved working with partners in the classroom and expressed their ideas by acting out their stories. Students were able to create their own setting and use their imagination to work together to get excited about their stories.*
- *Students worked in partnership to act out their puppetry and were interested in creating their characters and setting.*
- *Students were actively engaged in various forms of communication, showcasing their thoughts and creativity. They were utilizing both verbal and non-verbal methods.*
- *Students participated in collaborative discussions, sharing their insights and perspectives on different topics.*
- *Many students expressed their interests through art, drama, and other creative outlets. These projects not only allowed them to demonstrate their knowledge but also to explore their passions in a playful manner.*
- *Students were given opportunities to present their ideas to peers, enhancing their public speaking skills while allowing them to take pride in their work.*
- *They were engaged in constructive peer feedback sessions, where they learn to articulate their thoughts and appreciate the diverse viewpoints of their classmates.*

Children were able to make authentic connections between their artistic work and their development as readers and writers. Teachers observed gains in students' written and verbal literacy through their physical, sensual and imaginative connection to text, narrative, character, setting and expression.

- *The blend of theater arts and puppetry has significantly enriched our students' ability to engage with language in a dynamic way. It has allowed them to explore narratives and character development while honing their expressive language skills.*
- *My students were able to use their character and setting to write their folktale. The idea of acting out their puppetry and setting helped them with writing their folktale.*

- *Students have realized that creating art and creating a story or reading a story and picturing it in their heads are all connected. We have been able to refer back to puppetry in all ELA fields.*
- *Students practiced retelling skills. Thinking about the beginning, middle and end of the stories. They also planned their writing of Folktales with their puppets and then wrote their stories on paper during writing time. They used their puppets to act out their writing.*

Classroom Observations

Bridges classes would begin with physical and vocal warm-ups, artmaking, and storytelling. For instance, an artist might have children "exercise" the puppets, which helped them connect the idea of moving the characters while storytelling in a similar way to how they move their bodies.

Students were highly engaged in the activities, including the nonverbal storytelling exercise at the beginning of each session we saw. Children were comfortable sharing ideas both verbally and physically. During the exercises, students would get used to bookending stories with "Once Upon a Time" and "The End."

The teachers participated during the sessions we observed. One of the teachers commented on what her children have gained from the Bridges experience: "It helps them with vocabulary, especially the key vocabulary [the artist] uses. We worked on narrative [in class], and [at first] they had trouble with it. This program has helped them with writing narratives."

Another teacher said the program gave her an opportunity to observe her students, and she has learned a lot about them. "During academics, they're paired according to skill level, so they don't get to choose who they would like to work with. During Bridges, they get to choose, so it's interesting to see who pairs together and why." She explained that some of the children know each other from after school, and some want to be friends but don't necessarily have a chance to socialize during school hours. She believes the program helps children with their socialization skills. "It gives children a chance to learn how to include others."

Students learned to use movement and sound to represent character, settings and narrative. Overall, recreating movements and sounds allowed students to exercise their observation skills and practice verbally and physically expressing their ideas. The sessions allowed students to socialize and practice "saying yes" as they informally improvised stories during "free play." The activities reinforced vocabulary such as "sound effects," "gasped" and "fragile." In all of the classes, students were highly engaged and contributed imaginative ideas.

Sample Classroom Observations

As we watched the Bridges classrooms we documented the student and teacher behaviors, noting examples where children demonstrated their learning through verbal and non-verbal expression,

movement, imagination, and writing. The following descriptions are excerpts from four classroom observations. They illustrate the teaching and learning identified in this report.

Sample Observation #1

The children were seated in the carpeted area of the classroom and the artist began the session with an emotional check-in to see how children felt. Most of the students gave a thumbs-up. Next, she went over the session agenda.

Artist: Do you know what we're going to do today?

Two students raised their hands.

Student: A story!

Another student started rubbing his hands together, which is how the artist usually begins the sessions.

Artist: Why do we rub our hands together?
Student: So we can start our story.
Artist: What are we spreading when we rub our hands? Magic dust!

The children performed the familiar gesture of vigorously rubbing their palms and, in unison, releasing the imaginary fairy dust into the air.

Artist: Today, we're going to tell a different type of story. It's going to be a journey without words. We're going to use sounds.

The artist had the students repeat "sound effects" after her and then made different sounds, which the children imitated.

Artist: A sound can mean something. We gasped! What does that mean?
Student: Shocked.
Artist: Yes, shocked or surprised! Now, let's take a journey without words.

The artist created sounds such as a horn beeping, screeching brakes, and talking gibberish into an imaginary cellphone. The children imitated the different noises.

Artist: Let's stand so we can use our bodies.

The children stood up in the carpeted area and spread out without being asked. She led a nonverbal story-making activity during which she called on students to take turns adding a sound and/or gesture.

Artist: We will start the story with “Once Upon a Time” and finish with “The End!”

The students practiced repeating after her “Once Upon a Time” and “The End.” First, the artist called on a girl who pantomimed driving a car and encouraged the girl to make honking sounds. The artist added the sound of screeching brakes and the children imitated her. Some of the children started calling out what the artist was doing. She reminded the children to raise their hands if they wanted to contribute ideas. All of the students smiled, laughed, and excitedly participated. The artist made a creaking noise as she pantomimed shifting the gear to park. When she exclaimed, “The End!,” the students repeated after her in unison. After the exercise, the artist gave the class an opportunity to describe their observations.

Artist: What happened?
Student: You dropped the phone.
Artist: What are the sound effects that you liked?

Four students raised their hands.

Student: The honking.

Another student responded by imitating the sad trumpet sound.

Artist: What does the sad trumpet mean?
Students: “Oh, no!”
“You messed up!”’
Second Student: I like the car sound!

The artist imitated a classic three-note melody that is used to emphasize a dramatic point in a movie.

Artist: Dun, Dun, Duuuun!!! What does that sound mean?
Students: The queen is coming!
The shark is coming!
A monster!

The artist made the sad trumpet sound.

Student: Something got messed up.
Artist: Can you give an example of something that got messed up?
Second Student: You opened the refrigerator and all your food fell out.

The artist imitated a happy trumpet sound.
Student: Happy!
Artist: What’s an example of something happy?
Second Student: Maybe you told your friend something happy.

Artist: So a happy trumpet sound could mean “good news?”
Second Student: Yes.

The artist imitated another sound.
Students: A dog!

Artist: What’s another sound for a dog?
Student: A puppy crying.
Artist: Show me.

The children began experimenting with sounds of their own. The artist yelped and the children imitated her yelping. The artist made buzzing noises.

Artist: What happened?
Student: A bee that’s buzzing.

The artist made a similar buzzing noise but at a lower octave and more mechanical-sounding.

Artist: We’re watching a hovering spaceship!

The children created the same noise and some physically imitated spaceships, moving their arms in circles while rapidly bending and straightening their knees.

Next, the children went to their desks, and the artist handed out their settings (i.e. backdrops) and puppets. Similar to the other Bridges classes, the settings were created using construction paper and the paper puppets were illustrations with popsicle sticks affixed to the back. With partners, the students engaged in “free play.” While improvising stories, the children created dialogue and added sounds. For example, a pair of children pretended their puppets played in a park. They made whooshing sounds to represent the swing and slide. Another pair pretended it was their characters’ “day off.” The puppets played tag and a game called “Statues.” The children created a sound effect for each time a puppet got “tagged.”

Sample Observation #2

At this point, the Bridges class has finished making “settings” (i.e., backdrops) and puppets. The settings were created on large pieces of construction paper, folded in half so that the construction paper stands on the students’ desks. They reviewed the names of shapes and cut the shapes from different-colored construction paper with scissors and/or by hand. Some students glued cotton balls on their settings to represent clouds. They also decorated the settings with markers. Most children put inanimate objects in their settings but a few drew characters. Many children chose to create settings of “the park” and/or the character’s home. Many of them incorporated volcanoes and teleportals. The puppets were drawn on

paper and glued onto wooden sticks. The Bridges artists had students cut the characters in a circle or "bubble" rather than along their edges so that the puppets would last longer.

As part of their ELA curriculum, the children wrote stories based on each of these themes:

- A character wants the ability to do something she/he hasn't been able to do (For example, a turtle who wants to fly)
- An animal who wants to be a different color
- A character is bored with something and wants to change it.

The teacher suggested that for their puppet plays, each child should use the first theme on the list. The students used graphic organizers and a writing prompt:

Folktales
In your own words, come up with your original story using these prompts.

(How did the story begin?)
I am an ____ and I want ___.
(What problems did the characters face?)
But I need/can't ___.
(How did they solve those problems in the end?)
So ___ then ___.
(What is the story trying to teach us?)
Finally, we learn/are able to ___.

The artist explained to the children that there were four more Bridges sessions before presenting their stories and outlined the day's agenda.

Artist: You planned, organized, and drafted your stories. Now, you're asking yourself, "How can I make my story better or more interesting? What step is that called?
Student: Revising!

The artist led the class in a physical warm-up.

After the warm-up exercise, the teacher explained that students should take their first story out of their writing folders and put it on their desks. On their graphic organizers, many students had drawings but very little writing, while a few had written several pages. The classroom teacher emphasized the artist's instruction that revision was the day's focus.

Teacher: You're not writing. You're reading and thinking.

Artist: No pencils! We're imagining what is next in the puppet play.

The artist explained that students should perform their puppet play alone for five minutes. This was meant to help the students remember their stories before performing and practicing with a partner.

Artist: The reason why is because you want to work on your story.

Next, the artist directed the students to work in pairs for 20 minutes. They were asked to decide who would be "Partner A" and "Partner B." Each partner would take a turn sharing their play. (Most children worked with people seated near them, some children moved to other tables, and the teacher paired a few students together.)

The teacher and artist modeled how to work as a pair to perform a puppet play. The classroom teacher narrated at the beginning and then she and the artist acted out the roles, improvising lines. After modeling, they asked the students to take turns with their partners.

One story was about a butterfly named "Snowy." The butterfly was white and wanted to turn blue. Another story was about a snowman who wanted to be rainbow-colored, so he ate multi-colored Skittles candy. A third story was about a bird who wanted to be black. The rain washed the paint off him so he tried painting himself a second time. The bird went to a waterpark to celebrate, which caused the paint to wash off again, so he repainted himself.

One child told a story about a snowman who "wanted to be yellow and wanted skin." The snowman drank lemonade, which gave him yellow skin. Another child told a story about a pink butterfly that wanted to be orange so "she ate orange-colored food."

The artist called the class to attention and the classroom teacher explained that in the plays, the problem should be unresolved on the characters' first attempt, and the characters should try a second solution. The artist and teacher modeled improvising a puppet play. They asked the students to meta-analyze how they told the story.

The teacher explained, "I acted out what she suggested. Your job, as a partner, is to help the other person when they get stuck." They directed the children to practice again with their partners. Some students began improvising dialogue. Some students started to "free play," during which they improvised unstructured stories. It appeared to be easier for the students to improvise dialogue when they engaged in "free play." At the end of the session, the artist and teacher explained that they had video-recorded two partners and the class would study the video next week.

Sample Observation #3

The children gathered in the carpeted area, and the artist began the session by reviewing key vocabulary.

Artist: What's an example of a "setting?"
Student: A house outside.
Artist: Yes, "setting" could be anywhere you are imagining. What's a "character?"
Students: A person
An animal
Anything that could move.

Artist: Can a character be in a setting?
Student: Yes!
Artist: What's an example of a character?
Student: A superhero.
Artist: It could be a super tired, superhero! Show with your bodies what a "super tired superhero" looks like!

Students enthusiastically used their whole bodies.

Artist: I see people slumping! I see people slouching! I see people falling over! I see eyes drooping!

Artist: "Super tired" is the super tired superhero's "character trait." A "character trait" is when we describe a character. What are examples of "character traits?"
Students: Sweet.
Mean.
A wicked bunny.
Artist: So the bunny is - ?
Student: A character.
Artist: And wicked! What is "wicked?"
Student: A character trait.

Artist: What's an example of an action?
Students: Running.
Crawling.

A boy responded by demonstrating "climbing" with his hands. The artist directed the rest of the class to model "climbing."

The artist described children's climbing movements.

Artist: Some people are climbing with their feet! I see people hooking their fingers around the steps of a ladder!

The artist continued reviewing vocabulary.
.

Artist: What does “emotion” mean? Put your hands on your heart space. An “emotion” is a feeling in your heart space. What are examples of “emotions?”

Student: Happy.
Sad.
Grumpy.

The students were still gathered on the carpeted area, and the artist directed the children to stand in place. She directed the children to sprinkle fairy dust and begin creating their nonverbal group story with, “Once Upon a Time.” She started narrating and gave the children opportunities to add to the story.

Artist: Once upon a time, there was a bunny. A mad bunny.

Eight students emphatically showed anger on their faces. Three raised a finger on either side of their head to indicate ears (or raised horns). The artist described the children’s expressions.

Artist: What action is the mad bunny doing?
Student: Hopping.

Artist: What is the setting?
Student: A farm.

Artist: Do you remember “meeting the problem” in a story? The artist had the students repeat, “Meet the problem.” The artist called on children to contribute ideas for a “problem.”

Students: The bunny was mad because they wanted something to eat.
But there was nothing.
There was a carrot.
He wanted to eat a carrot.

Artist: Now, we “solve the problem.”

The artist had the students repeat, “Solve the problem” after her.

Artist: How do we solve the problem?

Student One: He finds carrots.
Artist: He’s on a farm! Can you grow carrots on a farm?
Students [calling out]: Yes!
Artist: What do you have to do?
Student Two: Dig!

Artist: He digs the carrot. And what happens next?

Students: He eats it.
Now, he's happy!

The children acted out the story of the mad rabbit digging and eating carrots. At the conclusion, the students said, "The End" in unison. After that, the artist had the students engage in "free play." During free play, many children made their characters speak to each other. Toward the end of the session, the artist wrapped up by having the children hold their puppets in the air on the count of three. The artist walked around and commented on all the puppets.

Sample Observation #4

The artist began by leading the class in exercising their bodies and then led them in doing similar exercises with their puppets. Students were very receptive to the idea of exercising their puppets and made large movements while smiling and laughing. Next, students took out the graphic organizers, and many began taking out their pencils. The classroom teacher explained that they were done with editing their stories and would focus on performing the stories as puppet plays.

Teacher: You're going to act out your story, not write it.

The artist and teacher circulated, listening to their plays and helping students. The researcher observed that some students were beginning to add dialogue. Some children incorporated ideas from their day-to-day lives, such as playing with friends.

Student [as character]: We can turn off the light and make a sleepover!

Other stories were very imaginative. For example, another pair of students acted out a story where the characters built a refrigerator to keep their cheese cold. In another group, one student narrated a story about a dog who wanted to be an artist. Her partner responded, "You ate paint! Now, you're an artist!" The teacher helped a pair of students read their story aloud first and then work on performing the story with their puppets and adding dialogue. At the end of the class period, the artist explained that they would continue practicing next week.