

Little Libraries' Evaluation



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Executive summary

The *Little Libraries* project, led by The Values Trust, aims to improve early literacy by providing Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres with nature-themed bookshelves and curated books for tamariki aged two to five. Focused on reaching 100,000 children, especially in high-deprivation areas, this evaluation explores the initiative's design, implementation, and early impact.

Evaluation Approach

A mixed-methods evaluation was undertaken, collecting data from 80 of the 100 participating centres. This included 30 online surveys and 50 phone interviews, capturing both quantitative metrics and rich qualitative insights. Respondents included centre managers (73%), teachers (20%), and other staff (8%), offering both strategic and frontline perspectives. Key areas of inquiry included changes in book access, engagement by children, staff and whānau involvement, book and shelving quality, and ideas for ongoing support.

Key Findings

- **Increased access and quality:** Following installation of the Little Libraries, centres reported major improvements in the range, quality, and display of books. Positive ratings for book range rose from 83% to 100%, book quality from 41% to 99%, and book display from 42% to 97%.
- **Stronger engagement with reading:** Almost three-quarters (73%) said children were reading more often, and over half (53%) said children were asking more frequently to be read to. Staff also reported reading more often to tamariki (58%), and one in five centres observed increased reading by whānau at pick-up and drop-off.
- **Positive behaviour:** Two-thirds (66%) reported increased interactions with books and 59% observed more overall engagement. Educators noted better book care, regular rotation of titles, and enthusiastic responses from tamariki. Comments included, *"They really enjoy their library,"* and *"The children love the concept."*
- **Functionality and space:** Most centres found the shelving worked well (76%), but 24% highlighted challenges related to size or limited book capacity, especially in small or high-enrolment centres. Suggestions included offering smaller or more modular options.
- **Safety concerns:** 47% of centres noted potential safety issues, particularly with children climbing or hiding behind the larger shelving units. Feedback included



calls for anchoring options or alternative placement guidance to mitigate risk. This is being addressed.

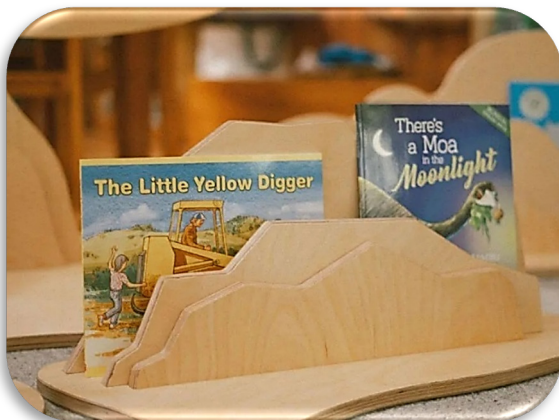
- **Strong interest in continued support:** Over 75% of centres expressed interest in early literacy workshops, along with ideas for engaging tamariki, parent resources, and themed book suggestions. Centres also emphasised the need for accessible, flexible formats (e.g., online resources).
- **Widespread endorsement:** An overwhelming 92% of respondents said they would recommend the Little Libraries to other centres, underscoring their value and impact.

Conclusion

The evaluation confirms that the *Little Libraries* project is achieving its goals. It is establishing the conditions to spark a love of reading, increasing book access in underserved communities, and helping to create inclusive, inviting literacy environments. The initiative is not only enhancing literacy engagement among tamariki but also supporting educator practice and, in some cases, encouraging greater whānau involvement. With continued delivery and the proposed design refinements the *Little Libraries* project is well positioned to meet its vision of reaching 100,000 tamariki and helping to support the conditions to leave a lasting legacy of literacy across Aotearoa.



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Introduction

This evaluation examines the *Little Libraries* project, an early childhood literacy initiative developed by The Values Trust. The project aims to improve access to books and support the development of early literacy skills among tamariki (children) aged two to five years. The evaluation explores the design, implementation, and early outcomes of the initiative, with particular attention to its reach in centres with whānau in communities characterised by deprivation.

Background

The *Little Libraries* project was established in response to growing concern about declining literacy levels among children in Aotearoa New Zealand. Research shows that early exposure to books and reading plays a critical role in a child's development, influencing not only literacy but also long-term educational and life outcomes. However, children in high-deprivation communities often have limited access to good quality books in their homes and early learning environments.

To help address this gap, the *Little Libraries* project provides early childhood education (ECE) centres with engaging, nature-themed bookshelf units and curated collections of award-winning children's books by New Zealand authors. These modular libraries, shaped like trees, shrubs, and rocks, are designed to make books both physically and visually accessible to tamariki, encouraging curiosity, storytelling, and shared reading.

In 2024, the project delivered 100 *Little Libraries* to ECE centres across the country, with a further 120 planned for distribution in 2025. The overarching **goal is to reach 100,000 tamariki**, nurturing a love of reading from an early age and supporting equity in early learning.

The initiative is grounded in strong partnerships, drawing on support from local communities, organisations, and donors. It is guided by the belief that every child, regardless of their background, should have access to quality books and opportunities to develop literacy skills that support their wellbeing and future learning.

Method

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to gather feedback on the implementation and impact of the *Little Libraries* project.

Data was collected from a total of 80 of the 100 participating ECE centres using two primary methods:

1. An online survey



Thirty ECE centres completed a structured online survey. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions to capture both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights.

2. Phone interviews

Fifty centres participated in semi-structured phone interviews. These interviews followed the same question set as the online survey but allowed respondents to elaborate and clarify their views.

An additional 20 centres were contacted via email and phone but did not respond, resulting in a final response rate of 80%.

Respondents included:

- Centre managers (73%)
- Teachers (20%)
- Other roles (8%), mainly centre administrators and team leaders.

This mix of roles provided both strategic and frontline perspectives on how the *Little Libraries* were used, perceived, and integrated into everyday centre life.

Respondents were asked about both the implementation and outcomes of the *Little Libraries* project. The key areas of inquiry included:

- Pre-existing literacy resources: Whether the centre had a library or similar resource prior to receiving the *Little Library*.
- Children's engagement: Changes in how often tamariki looked at or read books, and whether they asked to be read to more often.
- Staff and whānau involvement: Shifts in how often teachers and parents/caregivers read with children.
- Book quality and use: Perceptions of the books provided, including wear and tear and favourite titles.
- Bookshelf design and safety: Functionality, visual appeal, placement, and any safety concerns related to the shelving units.
- Suggestions and support needs: Ideas for improving the initiative and interest in additional resources or workshops to foster early literacy.



Findings

Whether centres had a library before receiving the *Little Library*

While most centres had a library prior to receiving the *Little Library*, seven centres did not.

Book range ratings improved from 82% to 100%

The evaluation clearly shows that the *Little Libraries* project significantly improved the quality, presentation, and diversity of books available in early childhood centres. Prior to receiving the *Little Library*, 83% of respondents rated the range of books in their existing collection as either *Very Good* or *Good*, while 17% rated it as *Poor*. After receiving their *Little Library*, **100% of respondents rated the range positively**, with 55% selecting *Very Good* and none rating it as *Poor*.

There were improvements in the quality and condition of the books from 41% to 99%

A similar trend emerged in book quality, where the **proportion of staff giving the centres *Very Good* or *Good* ratings increased from 41% to 99%**. For book condition, combined positive ratings rose from 45% to 98%, reflecting the improved durability and appearance of the new resources.

Book display improved from 42% to 97%

The most striking improvement was in the display of books. Before receiving the *Little Library*, only 42% of respondents rated their book display as *Very Good* or *Good*, while 58% rated it *Poor*. It is noted that some books were stored in baskets or boxes. After implementation, **97% of respondents gave their centre positive ratings for display**, clearly demonstrating the strong impact of the engaging, visually appealing shelving design.

“We didn't have any designated book shelves or anything, so the books were sitting in a basket, so we didn't have a shelf. Children didn't use them regularly, they couldn't see the books and wasn't visible enough because it depends, every child is different, so some might notice them, but when you're sitting with them then they would notice, but with the tree they can see them display.”

Baseline

Among centres that had a library prior to receiving the *Little Library*, most reported regular engagement with books and 81% reporting that there were children who read once or more times a day. Staff reading practices were generally strong, with 88% of centres reporting that their Kaiako read to children daily or more often.



Children, staff and parents are reading to children more often

Having received the *Little Libraries*, almost three-quarters (**73%**) **said the children were reading more often. Over half (53%) said the children were asking for staff to read to them more often**, with a further quarter unsure, and **58% said staff were reading to children more often**, with 19% unsure.

One in five centres (20%) noted that parents were reading more often to their children at pick up and drop off since the introduction of the *Little Libraries*.

“A lot of reading is happening, and the children always go over to the tree and go sit down at the table or the reading corner, and they are always picking up books to take to teachers to read to them. We can take one book off the shelf to read more, and the kids' parents come to read.”

“It encourages the families to spend time with the kids, they are coming in and reading with their kids, make it part of the morning when they drop the kids off before they leave.”

Impact on engagement with books

Qualitative feedback reinforces these findings.

Staff reported the *Little Libraries* have had a measurable and positive impact on children's engagement with books. **Two-thirds of respondents (66%) reported increased interactions with the books**, with **59% observing higher levels of engagement** and **32% noting increased excitement** about the books and reading among tamariki. These findings suggest that the libraries are not only improving access to reading materials but are also enhancing the quality of literacy experiences.

“I find it an attractive way to present literacy. As a whole we were always about promoting literacy. The tree stand we can move. We have a butterfly garden, I can set up books of interest in the tree, we have more of a connection on what's close by. If we have dinosaurs, we can connect it to dinosaurs.”

Tamariki are enjoying the books

Tamariki are enjoying the books. There is particular enthusiasm for stories by Māori authors, with their books most commonly being loved to the point of scruffiness.

Visually appealing

Many of the respondents highlighted the **visual appeal and accessibility** of the shelving units as key contributors to engagement. One noted, *“More accessible to tamariki – looks more appealing to the eye.”* Others emphasised the durability and presentation of the books themselves.



“The quality of the books, especially with the covering, has meant that favourites are read more and more... which helps with engagement of the children and their whānau too.”

Book care and rotation is improving

Some centres also reported **improved behaviours around book care**. For example, one educator commented, “[Children are] caring for the books more – putting them away when they are finished, not just left on the floor.” Additionally, the physical presence of the shelving encouraged more active curation and use of the collection, with one centre noting that, “The book tree looks more aesthetically pleasing and books are rotated more regularly.”

“It creates a more inviting area for our tamariki to sit in and read the books, previously having them on a shelf we had was not engaging and tamariki were not looking after them.”

Frequency and quality of engagement is improving

While a minority (18%) of respondents indicated no significant change in engagement, and a few noted increased wear and tear on popular titles, the overall feedback demonstrates that the *Little Libraries* have successfully **increased both the frequency and quality of children’s engagement with books in most centres**. Some centres are also using the libraries as a prompt for storytelling, encouraging tamariki to create and share their own stories.

“Reading area in the kindergarten with couch chairs and fluffy rug. We also put some stick on felt to the back of the tree so children can do their own storytelling with felt resources velcro on.”

The books are holding up well

Just under **half of centres (44%) reported that the books remained in good condition**, with many noting their durability despite frequent use. While **47% observed some wear and tear**, only seven centres requested specific book replacements. The titles were recorded and are being replaced to ensure the collections remain engaging and in good condition.

Functionality and fit of the shelves

Most centres found the *Little Library* shelving units to be well-suited to their environment, with **over half of respondents (51%) stating the libraries were working very well**, and a further 25% reporting they worked *somewhat well*.

However, around a quarter of centres (24%) indicated the libraries were *not working particularly well* in their specific contexts, often due to space constraints or limited book capacity. Some felt the large tree unit was too big for the size of their centre: “It is a



bit big for our space,” while another noted, “As a smaller spaced centre, we found the large tree too big. It took up more space in the room than needed.”

Several centres expressed a desire for increased book-holding capacity, especially in the larger centres. *“We have over 50 tamariki each day and need more books on offer than what the shelves can hold.”* They suggested offering smaller or more modular options, particularly for compact or high-use environments.

Children’s responses are positive

Overall, centres reported that children responded very positively to the *Little Libraries*, with many describing **high levels of enthusiasm and engagement**. One respondent noted simply, *“They really enjoy their library,”* while another noted, *“The children love the Little Library.”* Several educators highlighted how the design itself contributed to this enthusiasm: *“They love the design and we talk about it—they love the concept,”* and *“Excited, loved seeing the range of books.”* Even where the impact on reading habits was less pronounced, the aesthetic appeal remained strong, with one educator commenting, *“They loved the design but I don’t feel it changed the reading habits in our centre.”*

“The children have loved it! We find there is a lot more engagement and interests around stories, this has lead on to other activities and investigations.”

It has added quiet spaces to the centres

The libraries were widely used as **quiet, dedicated reading spaces**, often described as reading corners or nooks. Many centres curated these areas to promote calm and focused reading: *“A quiet space in the corner. The children respect the area and we purchased nice cushions for the area.”* Another centre explained, *“We set it up with bigger pillows... it changed the culture of the teachers. The children [are] relaxing in the area more and reading.”*

Some redesigned their spaces in response.

“When we first found out, I said let’s redo the whole area, we had fairy lights, a mat, the whole area was changed in response to the tree coming in. It looks so much tidier. It was perfect, we got to revamp the whole area. It’s made a difference to the look of the classroom, it brings it to life more.”

Wide range of uses

The design also supported **inclusive and flexible use**, especially for children with diverse needs: *“Children with minimal language—the books can be read without them using language... I have seen the difference.”* One centre described how the library supported emotional regulation and independent choice: *“If a child is not interested in*



the other forms of play or being distracting, we can encourage them to go and take a book and have quiet time.”

While some noted the shelving units were large or not easily moved, *“They’re quite big... we can’t move it around as much”*, other centres found creative ways to integrate the shelves and found them easy to move.

“We’ve got the rocks and trees, and it’s amazing, you can move it from place to place. They can move it to the different areas in the centre and put books in that relate to the space, and they fit anywhere.”

“We move the shelves, we had ours outside, I think there was more engagement then, and we moved it to our nursery, and we had the board books downlow for them. A lot more reading in different places. I find that the view is more open, with grass areas and nooks to read. They’re able to read because there are nooks outside.”

Interest in further support and professional development

Many centres expressed strong interest in additional resources and support to further enhance literacy outcomes. Over **75%** of respondents indicated they would welcome **workshops for teachers on early literacy**, with many also requesting **ideas for engaging children in reading** (59%) and **parent workshops on reading at home** (42%). Book recommendations were also sought by a third of centres, highlighting the desire to continually refresh and expand their collections.

However, centres noted that flexibility and accessibility are key. One educator explained, *“Absolutely, we would love to... anything online or anything our staff could attend, we would love resources that could be emailed to us.”* While the appetite for professional learning is strong, practical constraints were noted: *“Resources yes – workshops would depend on staff availability.”*

Several centres also emphasised a desire for creative and interest-based content, particularly to support tamariki who already show a love for stories. As one respondent put it, *“Just helping children who have a passion for reading stories and making it more creative and adventurous for them.”* Popular themes such as *“dinosaurs, typical children’s topics”* were mentioned as potential topics for future books.

Whānau engagement remains a priority but presents challenges for many centres. One respondent noted, *“When we have whānau events, only like one or two parents turn up even when we do everything to get them to the centre after hours or weekends.”* They suggested low-barrier, family-friendly literacy supports would be needed, potentially through take-home kits, simple home activities, or materials that can be shared outside of centre hours.



Safety issues

While the majority of centres reported no issues, just under **half (47%) identified safety concerns related to the *Little Library* shelving units**, particularly the larger tree design. A common theme among these responses was that children were drawn to climb or hide behind the structures, raising potential supervision and stability concerns. One respondent noted, *“The larger tree became a space where children tried to climb or hide behind it.”*

Several centres also raised concerns about unsecured units in open spaces. One centre explained, *“The large tree cannot be attached to the wall, and children get behind it or stand on it—it is big and heavy and could fall over.”* Another highlighted movement issues, sharing, *“We have found a lot of our children like to hide behind the shelf, and they are able to slide the shelves across our carpet and lino.”*

Most (92%) would recommend *Little Libraries* to other ECEs

The *Little Libraries* initiative received overwhelmingly positive endorsement from participating centres, with **92% of respondents stating they would recommend it** to other ECEs.

This reflects wide appreciation for both the concept and its execution. As one educator noted, *“It is fantastic and such an awesome way to present books.”* Another affirmed, *“They’ve been good,”* while others praised the design and layout: *“The layout is really good.”*

There were suggestions for improvement, focusing on ways to enhance the functionality, for example, *“If the back part of the tree was flat, I could put it at the wall... that would be good,”* and *“I wonder if the tree could be smaller for a nursery room—we only use the rocks and shrubs.”* Some also noted considerations around supervision and safety, such as *“They will climb on anything,”* reinforcing the importance of placement and oversight in busy learning environments.

A few respondents highlighted the benefit of limited book capacity, with one explaining, *“It could become overwhelming, and I like rotating the books out.”* These insights suggest that while the design is widely appreciated, small adaptations could further support diverse centre needs.

Conclusion

The *Little Libraries* project is delivering on its vision to inspire a love of reading among tamariki and ensure more equitable access to high-quality books across Aotearoa. The initiative is grounded in the belief that *every child deserves the chance to fall in love with books*, and the evaluation findings strongly affirm that this intention is being realised in the ECEs participating in the project.



Centres reported significant improvements in the range, quality, and presentation of books, with a marked increase in children's reading behaviours, curiosity, and excitement. Tamariki are engaging with books more frequently, staff are reading more often, and even whānau are increasingly participating in reading during drop-off and pick-up times. The visually appealing and accessible shelving units have helped transform reading into a more prominent and fun part of daily life, particularly in communities that previously lacked access to good quality books.

Importantly, the project is helping to reduce disparities in early literacy by reaching centres in areas of high social and economic deprivation, aligning directly with *Little Libraries'* commitment to *level the playing field*. Many centres that had limited or no previous library spaces described the *Little Libraries* as transformative. The initiative is not only creating new reading environments but also helping to reshape the culture of literacy within these settings.

Feedback on the shelving design was positive, though some centres raised practical and safety considerations. These included suggestions for smaller or more modular shelving options and better anchoring solutions. It is noted that these issues are being addressed in subsequent designs to ensure that the libraries remain safe, adaptable, and suitable for a wide range of centre sizes and layouts.

There is strong momentum for further engagement. Centres expressed a clear appetite for ongoing support, including professional development, themed resources, and whānau engagement strategies. These supports would build on the foundation the *Little Libraries* have laid and help sustain the project's long-term impact.

In summary, the *Little Libraries* project is achieving what it set out to do: tamariki are engaging in reading in higher levels, it is making books accessible, and it helping to establish the conditions for tamariki to thrive through literacy. With continued delivery, refinement, and targeted support to ECEs, the initiative is well positioned to meet its ambitious goal of reaching 100,000 tamariki, and to help make a lasting difference in the lives of children, whānau, and educators across Aotearoa.



Little Libraries Project – Summary for Participating ECEs

Thank you for being part of the Little Libraries project and sharing your experiences with our evaluator. This summary captures key insights from 80 participating centres and highlights how your feedback is shaping the project's future.

About the Project

Led by *The Values Trust*, the **Little Libraries** initiative aims to promote early literacy by delivering nature-themed bookshelves and curated, award-winning New Zealand books to early childhood education (ECE) centres. The project focuses on reaching tamariki aged 2–5, particularly in communities with high levels of deprivation, with a goal to reach **100,000 children across Aotearoa**.

Evaluation Approach

- **80 ECE centres** participated (out of 100)
- **30 online surveys** and **50 phone interviews (thank you!)**
- Respondents: Centre Managers (73%), Kaiako (20%), Admin/Other Staff (8%)

Key questions we had included:

- Book access and display – are they making a difference to engagement
- Are they helping to engage tamariki, staff, and whānau
- Do they work well and are they safe
- Is there interest in further support and resources



What You Told Us Changed in Your Centres

Better Books, Better Access – before and after getting the libraries...

- **Range of books:** 83% → **100% positive**
- **Book quality:** 41% → **99% positive**
- **Book display:** 42% → **97% positive**

“The tree makes books visible. Children now spot them straight away.”

More Reading, More Enjoyment and Fun

- **73%** said tamariki are reading more often
- **53%** said tamariki are asking to be read to more
- **58%** said staff are reading more often
- **1 in 5** centres saw **increased whānau reading** at drop-off and pick-up

“It encourages families to spend time reading with their kids before leaving.”

Tamariki Are More Engaged

- **66%** are seeing more interaction with books
- **59%** are observing more overall engagement
- Positive behaviours include better book care, storytelling, and independent choice

Shelving Design & Use

What's Working

- **76%** said the shelves work well in their space
- Shelves inspired redesigns of reading corners and quiet areas

“It brought our classroom to life—we revamped the whole space.”

What Needs Attention

- **24%** said they would like smaller shelves and more book slots
- **47%** noted children climbing and hiding behind shelves

Your feedback has helped us redesign the shelves – thank you.

What You Want Next



- **75%+** want teacher PD on early literacy (esp. online)
- **59%** want ideas for engaging tamariki
- **42%** want whānau-friendly resources
- Ongoing book suggestions and themes (e.g., Māori stories, dinosaurs)

“Help us keep it fresh with new themes and support for passionate readers.”

Strong Endorsement

- **92%** would recommend Little Libraries to other centres
- Most centres reported increased literacy engagement and inclusivity
- Shelving and books are valued

“It’s not just a shelf—it’s a whole shift in how we use and love books.”

Looking Ahead

The Little Libraries project is helping tamariki **fall in love with reading**. Your feedback is helping us:

- Improve the design of our shelves
- Choose great books
- Develop flexible literacy supports
- Develop resources for educators and whānau

We are on track to reach **100,000 tamariki** and foster a lasting love of reading for generations to come.

Ngā mihi nui for being part of this journey. You are helping to grow little bookworms – one book at a time.