

Literacy Matters: Strategies and best practice initiatives for supporting development through literacy and reading in the Netherlands

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Abstract:

This paper provides a synopsis of best practice and literacy programs currently being promoted in the Netherlands. These programs support and foster the achievement of goals as set out in the new Library Law. The Count on skills! program designed to prevent and curate low literacy and the Art of reading program will be highlighted.

Keywords: Literacy Matters!, reading programs, Netherlands.

Introduction

Of the 17 million people living in the Netherlands, there are approximately 1.3 million residents between the ages of 16 and 65 who have low literacy skills. Alongside these statistics, the number of library-organizations has been steadily falling since 1980 from 800 to 155 (2016). There are 790 branches with 200 which are without staff (self-service libraries). There are nine provincial library service organisations across twelve provinces, one Library Association and one National Library. This paper outlines best practice initiatives and strategies employed by the Dutch Government to rise literacy rates and make the best possible use of the resources currently available.

Background

In the fall 2014 the Dutch Parliament adopted a new public library law, the *Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheken* (WSOB). According to the new law it is the responsibility of public libraries to provide the general public access to information and culture, guided by principles such as independence, credibility, accessibility, pluralism and authenticity. Their specific tasks are to:

- make available knowledge and information;
- facilitate learning;
- promote reading and a taste for literature;
- promote art and culture; and
- to organize social encounters and debate.

The new law also defines the scope of the digital library and provides funding while the National Library is responsible for coordinating the new system.

A new role for the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB), The National Library

The new law defines the roles of the various players within the national network which is coordinated by the KB. The KB is building a digital infrastructure for public libraries that will be integrated in the National Digital Library and where the central digital infrastructure hosts ICT applications for all the libraries throughout the country. In addition the digital library will offer access to a range of e-books, audiobooks, e-music, databases, articles and content for education, all accessible by the same catalogue. As part of the new system, a number of programs have been created to counter large numbers of people who have been identified as illiterate.

Tel mee met Taal - Count on skills: to prevent and curate low literacy

Approximately 1.3 million residents of the Netherlands between the ages of 16 and 65 have low literacy skills. They struggle to read, write and communicate in the Dutch language. Despite efforts made by many parties over time, the number of people with low literacy skills has not decreased in recent years and has even increased among a number of groups.

Count on skills! Has been designed to combine and give a boost to a variety of discrete efforts to counter this problem. It features an integrated approach by:

- combining reading promotion and the countering of low literacy;
- covering the three domains of family, health and work; and
- dove-tailing separate activities in *one* joint action programme that includes three Dutch ministries: the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

Thus, the programme creates synergy by linking various fields in which language plays a major role. These fields include schools, libraries and community centres, as well as social neighbourhood teams, the debt assistance scheme, early school leaving programs, (re-) integration, youth social services and income support departments. Of course prevention of low literacy is a major element of *Count on Skills!*

The program is aimed at preventing/combating low literacy and promoting reading. It is supplementary to regular education programs. The three domains of *Count on Skills* focus on family literacy, the employment market and healthcare. There are five action points:

- local networking approach to low literacy via the programme Language for Life;

- regional language agreements and incentive budgets;
- reading promotion via *The Art of Reading* programme which focusses on prevention and is aimed at children between birth and 18 years of age and families;
- Experiments - *Count on Skills* invests in experimental pilot programs which aim to provide strategies to better serve target groups that are difficult to reach, to unite various segments that are affected by low literacy, and to develop instruments for addressing language deficits and low literacy; and
- knowledge (research) and communication.

The main goals of the programme are to lead 45,000 low literate people to a language course and to reach 1,000,000 children aged from birth to twelve years of age with *BookStart* and *The Library at School* programs.

Curation – some examples

- *Pilot Education for Women with Ambition* (Vrouwen) (EVA in Dutch) is a pilot program that supports organisations in five regions that help women aged aged between 30-55 to improve their literacy, numeracy and computer skills. Illiteracy levels among women are comparatively higher and the percentage of illiterate women in the Netherlands is higher than in neighbouring countries.
- Pilot programs that specifically target senior citizens with low literacy skills (aged 55+) will also be supported. These programs are aimed at increasing the reach among various target groups, developing new instruments or materials (digital and other) that address a need, and/or connecting different policy areas or skills.
- Pilot programs will also be run in libraries for adults who need to increase essential skills (reading, writing, digital and health), so they can participate more successfully in society. Pilots are held in the context of lifelong learning. For example, libraries and the Dutch tax authorities reached an agreement whereby trained library staff help people to fill in their tax papers (digitally).

Prevention of illiteracy through Reading Promotion – The Art of Reading - Kunst van Lezen – BoekStart en de Bibliotheek op school

The Art of Reading program including *BookStart* (birth to four years of age), *The Library at School* (four to twelve and twelve to eighteen years of age) and *Literacy Networks* have become major aspects of the prevention part of *Count on Skills* (Action point 3 and 4A).

- Action point 3: Reading promotion via *The Art of Reading*. Municipal authorities play a key role in shaping local libraries, and thereby also in the promotion of reading. *The Art of Reading* program offers municipalities a tailored approach via libraries, which coordinate the activities and support schools, child health centres and kindergartens in designing an approach to reading promotion. The Dutch Reading Foundation acts as the lead agency, working in conjunction with the National Library of the Netherlands to ensure coordination and support at national level.
- Action point 4A: experiment *The Art of Reading* pilot for families with poor language skills. This pilot helps parents with poor literacy skills to engage with reading, and to read to their children. The experiment is aimed at raising awareness and reaching more effectively low-literacy parents within *BookStart* and *The Library at School* in primary schools. This approach encourages the enjoyment of reading, and helps to prevent language deficits among children. At the same time, parents are encouraged to take an active interest in language themselves. The Dutch Reading Foundation and the

National Library of the Netherlands are conducting this pilot in collaboration with the Reading & Writing Foundation.

Growing number of young library members

The number of young library members has grown in the last few years in The Netherlands. This is largely due to *BookStart* and the *Library at school*. Details for these two programs are below.

Range Bookstart

- In 2015 approximately 56,500 Dutch babies became a member of the library (32.3% of the 175,000 Dutch babies born in 2014). These babies received the BookStart Briefcase (with two books and instructions on how to read with a baby).
- 154 (99.4%) of the 155 Dutch library organizations participate in BookStart for babies and 748 of the 788 branches (94.9%).
- Since 2012 BookStart has implemented a program aimed at Childcare organizations. 123 (79.3%) of the 155 library organizations participate.
- They reach approximately 1,200 of the total of 9,350 childcare locations (12.8%). At these locations about 40,000 children between 0-4 years of age are reached.
- 264 childcare locations took part in the Monitor BookStart Childcare program (spring 2016). The questionnaires were completed by 188 location managers, 701 teaching staff and 39 library employees.

Range The Library at School

- 135 (87.1%) of the 155 educational organizations join the Library at Primary School program. About 2,900 schools (May 2016) are reached, and approximately 640,000 pupils. That is about 45% of the number of regular primary schools in the Netherlands (6,550, 2014).
- 1,400 schools took part in the Monitor Library in primary school 2015/2016. The questionnaires were completed by 1,270 reading consultants (some for several schools), 12,880 teachers and 127,520 pupils.
- In secondary schools The Library at School program was implemented in 2014. It aims on the lower levels of secondary education. About 30 library organizations are conducting pilots in approximately 55 schools (about 5%).
- 42 schools took part in the Monitor Library in secondary schools. The questionnaires were completed by 36 reading consultants, 363 teachers and 6,332 pupils.