

Literacy Matters! An integrated approach to literacy, reading and libraries in the Netherlands

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Abstract:

In 2015, a new Library law was introduced in the Netherlands. One of the five core functions within the law is the promotion of reading and an introduction to literature for all young people. Another article dictates that public libraries should support local education. The target group for this law is young people (0-18 years old) and the goals for action for public libraries are explicit. This paper examines the Ongoing Reading Line 0-18 program which was originally developed to promote reading and education in literature. The Ongoing Reading Line provides a starting point for public libraries to fulfill the goals of the new national Library policy.

Keywords: public libraries, national programs, schools, Netherlands

National policy on reading promotion

On January 1st 2015, a new Library law was introduced in the Netherlands. One of the five core functions within this new law is the promotion of reading and an introduction to literature for all young people. Another article dictates that public libraries should support local education. The target group for this law is young people (0-18 years old) and the goals for action for public libraries are explicit.

Public libraries have been working closely with education on reading promotion for many years and several national programs have been developed, for example Children's Book Week started in 1955 and the National Read Aloud Contest is in its twenty second year. *Foundation Read* and public libraries have been working on reading promotion and literature since 2008 in a broad structural way with programs for reading to children. Reading in free time has also been imbedded in preschool and primary schools and is designed to help children become more skilled in language and to gain a larger vocabulary.

The Ongoing Reading Line

Foundation Read has developed the *Ongoing Reading Line 0-18* which outlines a vision for reading promotion and the education of literature. The program *The Art of Reading* (BoekStart and Public Library at School, both primary and secondary) ensures that by connecting with the *Ongoing Reading Line*, all children and adolescents have access to books, reading promotion activities and national reading programs without experiencing difficulties when switching from preschool to primary school or from primary to secondary school.

Libraries are working together with healthcare centres, maternity care, day-care centres, bookshops and schools. Good collaborative partnerships with local government are also essential to ensure that policy and funding are connected to this library program. The programs consist of several building blocks including network and policy, expertise, collection, reading plans, a digital platform, transport and finances. Responsibilities are shared between the library, schools and preschools. According to a contractual agreement, the school pays a fixed price per pupil and receives a library, trained staff, two to four hours of professional support by a reading consultant from the library, a collection of three to five books per pupil, plus activities.

By creating a strategic network between the library and politicians, stakeholders from day care centres, healthcare, cultural organizations (including bookshops and publishers) and education, the programs are much more imbedded in policy and more easily funded. The ad hoc nature that characterized previous collaborations on reading promotion has now disappeared.

In the future, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Wellbeing (OCW) will continue to invest together with other ministries for the improvement of language skills and by doing so, improve low literacy skills exhibited by young people and adults. The *Art of Reading* program will continue, broaden and focus more on specific target groups such as families at risk.

BoekStart

BoekStart promotes early reading, storytelling and nursery rhymes with very young children. A major aspect of the program is to encourage parents and children to experience the pleasure of reading books together. It gives young children a jumpstart at primary school and it strengthens the bond between parents and children.

The results of this program are being monitored by an annual questionnaire. Results so far indicate that:

- more parents start early reading;
- parents who read to their baby before eight months old have children with better language skills;
- effects from the program are even stronger over a longer period of time;
- over-active babies profit the most from the program; and
- parents visit the library more often and are more familiar with baby books.

One out of three parents accept the invitation to go to the library, subscribe their baby to the program, and collect a small suitcase with two baby books and information on reading. Ninety-nine percent of Dutch libraries take part in this national program so the majority of parents are made aware of the special corner and reading materials (BoekStart Evaluation, 2014). The program also ensures that parents read more. Their children also like it and ask for

more. Thus the program provides children with increased advantages when acquiring language skills which continue to develop as they get older.

BoekStart in day care centres focuses on toddlers in playgrounds and other institutions. By early 2015 one hundred library organizations (63%) were working along with over eight hundred (13%) day care centres. By the end of 2015 it is expected that more than one thousand day care centres will be reached.

Six elements of the program are important:

- together with the library, an attractive reading place is created;
- a good collection of books suitable for babies and toddlers (including digital) are available;
- expertise of staff is increased by extra training;
- reading becomes a structural moment in daily routine via the Reading Plan policy; and
- working together with partners creates a reading promotion network (local municipality, healthcare, library, day care).

Currently, higher educated persons form the majority of the parents participating in the program. Therefore, the Ministry wants to focus on reaching lower educated parents. This objective requires more funding. We expect the results of *BoekStart* to be even more successful when this focus is implemented.

The Public Library at School

To promote reading and to professionalise the approach of reading, The *Public Library at School* program was implemented in 2009. Seventy-five percent of the library organizations in the Netherlands are participating with two thousand, four hundred primary schools. This makes up thirty-six percent of Dutch primary schools.

Libraries and schools are working on developing a framework for language improvement, reading promotion and the development of children's media skills. The aim is to get children to read more, both at school and in their leisure time at home. When more reading occurs, the positive effects of reading on reading motivation and language skills will be really improved.

With the *Public Library at School* program, the primary schools and the public libraries sign a contract for several years in which they agree to work together on:

- a joint policy on reading for school and the library;
- an up-to-date, attractive collection to enrich reading education;
- books and other materials can be taken home;
- books will be presented with the covers facing the front and on movable bookshelves;
- a reading consultant from the library will assist the reading coordinator from school;
- annual targets will be determined based on monitored results;
- every year all activities will be recorded in a reading and media plan; and
- a digital portal which helps with the search and registration of materials, stimulates reading, keeps track of reading history and finding reliable information

A final data analysis and report on the results and effects of the *Public Library at School* will be published at the end of 2015, but an interim report already shows that the program is having positive results and stimulating reading skills development. All pupils show improved skills in participating schools compared to schools that do not take part. Girls show the

biggest positive effects. While all students show improvement in skill levels, students' motivation to read in leisure time has also increased (Nielen & Bus, 2013).

Under this program reading promotion becomes a part of the language policy of the school. Schools and the library develop a reading plan that describes reading pleasure goals and how the team will work on these goals. The plan also describes the collection, the required skills of professionals working on the program, daily routines and how the policy and program will be monitored. The national instrument *Monitor at School* has been developed specifically for this program where teachers, pupils and library personnel fill in an annual questionnaire. Results are reported using graphics for both each school and at the national level.

Low literacy and illiteracy

Reading promotion as a means to combat low literacy is progressing and becoming more popular. *Foundation Read* has taken the initiative to start a National Reading Coalition which is a collaboration between Foundation Read, the Royal Library, the National Library Association (VOB), CPNB and Foundation Reading & Writing. The Coalition has published a vision statement that in 2025 no child will leave secondary school below their reading-for-age level and all adults will be receiving aid to become literate.

Taking language into account

Three different ministries are working together during the next three years to make funds available for reading promotion and to combat illiteracy. This commitment has been published as part of their action program *Tel mee met Taal 2016-2018 (Take language into account)*. One of the actions is the continuation and extension of the *Art of Reading* program. *Foundation Read* and public libraries are pleased with this commitment, because now they can continue to work effectively on increasing reading for pleasure and to continue the fight against illiteracy and low literacy.

Fighting adult illiteracy requires a different approach. Municipalities, libraries, unemployment agencies, factories and other companies will be joining forces in order to ensure that at least forty-five thousand adults improve their language skills by becoming a member of a language project run by libraries. These projects will also run for families, in work situations and by healthcare organizations.

Libraries are involved because:

- libraries are trustworthy, reliable, accessible, multicultural and authentic;
- libraries bring people together;
- libraries are part of a network (put down in the law WSOB);
- they run national programs with results at the local level; and
- libraries can offer a broad pallet of non-formal education on basic skills development (reading clubs, language support groups, digital spots and several digital classes).

Therefore public libraries will be equipped as language houses to provide community centres for adults with low skills in reading and writing. To stop illiteracy we need a very broad approach that is led by a large group of experts, as well as active partnerships. The Netherlands has one hundred and sixty library organizations with a total of over eight hundred branches. In many villages the library is the only remaining public service so it makes sense to use the infrastructure that already exists to improve literacy and reading.

“We need to stop the estafette in which low literate generations in families hand over the stick from one to another and groups of people are excluded from society and cannot participate.

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