

Dutch approach to prevent and curate low literacy

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Abstract:

1.3 million Dutch people between the ages of 16 and 65 have low literacy skills. They struggle to read, write and communicate. In order to prevent and curate low literacy in The Netherlands, the government initiated the programme Count on Skills. The programme creates synergy by linking various fields in which language plays a role: at school, in libraries and community centres, but also in social neighbourhood teams, youth social services and income support departments. Count on Skills focuses on three domains (family, employment market and healthcare). The preventive approach is called The Art of Reading. This programme (which contains BookStart, The Library at School and reading promotion networks) not only aims to promote a love of reading, but also aims to improve language performance and to reduce low literacy. One of the projects to reach low literate families is Score a Book! This reading promotion project is a joint event of Libraries and Premier League Football Clubs. In the curative approach the main goal is to reach 45.000 adults who lack basic skills (reading, writing and digital skills). The National Library of the Netherlands works closely with the Dutch Reading and Writing Foundation to close the skills gap. The National Library coordinates the national wide program The Library and Basic Skills in which the main goal is to implement a national wide infrastructure in all libraries with a wide range of products and to improve the basic skills of vulnerable target groups, such as low literate people, migrants and unemployed people. One of the curative projects is the cooperation between the Dutch Tax Authority and the Dutch National Library in which volunteers in libraries assists people with low digital literacy skills to fill in their tax-form online.

Keywords:

Prevention, curation, low literacy, reading promotion, basic skills

Introduction

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, the number of people with low literacy skills has not decreased in recent years and has even increased among a number of groups.

The *Tel mee met Taal* (Count on Skills) action programme is the response of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to jointly prevent a situation where people with limited literacy skills become marginalised. The programme creates synergy by linking various fields in which language plays a role: at school, in libraries and community centres, but also in social neighbourhood teams, the debt assistance scheme, early school leaving, (re-)integration, youth social services and income support departments. *Count on Skills* (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2015) focuses on three domains (family, employment market and healthcare) and comprises 5 preventive and curative action lines.

Preventive approach

In the past, reading promotion as carried out by libraries and schools generally had a fragmented character, with a great deal of freedom and a virtual absence of clear goals. Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on a structural approach to reading promotion. This change is inspired by such trends as the growing importance attached to the accountability of public institutions, the concern about the language performance of children and adolescents and the rise of low literacy in the population at large (Buisman et.al., 2013). Policy makers worry that these trends could thwart the government's ambition to ensure that the Netherlands remains among the leading knowledge economies in the world. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science initiated the *Art of Reading* programme in 2008. The Art of Reading not only aims to promote a love of reading, but also aims to improve language performance and to reduce functional illiteracy. It constitutes a break with the past in the measurable aims it sets for libraries and schools, the links it forges between cultural and literacy policies and the view it takes of language/literacy development as a joint concern of schools and libraries. Thus, by linking national and local literacy goals to the structural work of libraries, *The Art of Reading* aligns with the vision of public libraries promoted by UNESCO (UIL, 2016).

In 2016 *The Art of Reading* programme developed by The Dutch Reading foundation and The National Library was incorporated into the *Count on Skills* programme. In this new context, the target of the general *Art of Reading* programmes *BookStart* and *The Library at School* is to reach 1 million children (aged 0-12) with reading promotion activities by the end of 2018. This amounts to approximately half the population of this age group. By the end of 2016 the programmes had reached about 673,000 children. In addition to the general programmes, there is a special action line concerned with preventing low literacy, which focuses specifically on families at risk. Within this action line, reading promotion as a means of preventing and combating low literacy is gradually taking shape. In short, the joint efforts of three national ministries reinforce the role of public libraries as a major force for promoting literacy development by creating a lifelong reading environment of literacy services and resources for babies, children, young people and adults (UIL, 2016).

The Reading Foundation has taken the initiative to start a National Reading Coalition. This is a collaborative venture involving The Reading Foundation (chair), The National Library of the Netherlands, The National Library Association (VOB), CPNB (Foundation for Book promotion) and The Reading & Writing Foundation (aim is to remedy low literacy). In 2017, the Literature Museum also joined the coalition. The coalition has jointly announced its ambition that by 2025 no child should leave primary school with a reading skills deficit and that all adults should be literate or be on the way to become literate.

The Ongoing Reading Line

Following the example of the *Ongoing Learning Line* in the education sector (which views education as a continuous process, regardless of the boundaries within and between parts of the system), the Reading Foundation has developed the *Ongoing Reading Line 0-18* which outlines its vision for reading promotion for this age group. *BookStart* and *The Library at School* seek to ensure that all children and adolescents familiarise themselves with books by participating in activities described in the *Ongoing Reading Line* and in national reading programmes. The *Ongoing Reading Line* is also intended to ensure that children do not experience difficulties when transferring from preschool to primary school or from primary to secondary school.

The pillars of the Art of Reading

The Art of Reading has defined four interconnected ‘pillars’ that are necessary to support successful reading promotion programmes. In the Dutch language the four initial letters of the pillars constitute the word LEES (READ):

- Leesomgeving (the reading environment, including the quality of the collection)
- Expertise
- Evidentie (evidence)
- Samenwerking (collaboration)

Reading environment

The proximity of books is a major determining factor of reading behaviour (Evans e.a. 2010; Nielen & Bus, 2013). A stimulating reading environment requires a focused concern with the creation of a sound collection which is attractively presented (both physically and digitally, through attractive bookcases and accessible websites and apps) and which meets the needs of the population in a child care centre or school. The reading environment also comprises time and space for reading (Chambers, 1991). These are created by allocating time for activities such as silent reading, reading aloud, discussions about books, literature education, and by constructing quiet reading spots in the room or building. Within the reading environment, which encompasses schools, libraries and homes, libraries are viewed as resources which support the literacy development of people of all ages – babies, children and parents – and all levels of literacy (UIL, 2016).

Expertise

The importance of a professional librarian in the school library has been evidenced by a range of research studies (eg. *School libraries impact studies* on www.lrs.org). In the course of its existence, the *Art of Reading* programme has initiated the development of a wide range of training courses and workshops in order to professionally develop library staff, child care professionals and teachers in the domains of reading promotion, didactic approaches and information skills teaching (separately financed by the National Library). In addition, the *Art of Reading* programme and the Reading Foundation have worked together to organise

conferences, workshops and meetings to call attention to the importance of fostering structural approaches in reading promotion.

Evidence

Local, regional and national authorities increasingly call for proof of the effects of reading promotion on children's language development in order to justify the ongoing investment in structural reading promotion efforts. To meet these demands, the Reading Foundation has initiated two PhD research studies of the effects of *BookStart* and *The Library at School*. Furthermore, the *Art of Reading* programme has commissioned the development of digital monitoring instruments that provide insight into the development of the reading motivation and behaviour of the three target groups in local preschools, primary schools and secondary schools. Simultaneously, through the aggregation of data, these instruments cast light on developments in reading motivation and behaviour at the national level. These developments are made public through brochures and fact sheets, such as *Lezen meten, een basis voor beleid* ('Measuring reading, a basis for policy', Broekhof & Broek, 2013). National and international research findings are attractively published in a series of brochures that have become a standard for this topic, such as *Meer lezen, beter in taal* ('Better in language by reading more') and *Van leesmotivatie naar taalprestatie* ('From reading motivation to language performance'). Also, the concise, practical brochures published by the Reading Foundation under the name of *Kwestie van Lezen* ('Reading Matters') are widely used by libraries in their communication with policy makers, civil servants, youth health care workers, child care staff and teachers.

Collaboration (strategic)

Libraries work together with healthcare centres, maternity care and day-care centres, schools and bookshops. Close collaboration with local government is also essential. Local authorities want the assurance that their policies and funding can be aligned with this library-run programme. By setting up a strategic literacy/reading promotion network centred around the library, involving politicians, stakeholders from day-care centres, healthcare organisations, cultural organisations (including bookshops and publishers) and educational institutions, the programmes are better embedded in policy and easier to finance. As a result, the *laissez-faire* approach that used to characterise collaboration in the field of reading promotion has disappeared.

Score a Book!

One of the projects within the special action line which focuses specifically on families at risk is *Score a Book!* Learning to read well is of great importance to children. It helps even more when they enjoy reading. With this in mind, the provincial library organization in the northern province of Groningen and the Premier League football club FC Groningen are supporting the *Score a Book!* Project which is a unique reading project for primary school pupils aged 7 to 9. *Score a Book!* combines reading with football, because you can score anywhere!

With *Score a Book!* pupils are challenged in a playful way to read as many books as they can in class in ten weeks. The pupils are cheered on by a professional football player (on video). For every book they have read, the pupils stick a 'ball' (sticker) on a poster. In this way we know how many books students in each class have read during the project. *Score a Book!* is concluded with a sporting party at which the pupils can score on the football pitch.

It is known that boys lag behind girls in the area of reading. By connecting a reading project to football, the boys are particularly engaged. Since 2016, the project has been expanded with a home edition, which focuses specifically on low literate families. The pupils encourage their parents and other family members to read extra at home as well.

Score a Book! has grown in the six years of operation to become one of the most successful reading projects in the northern part of the Netherlands. In 2016, in the province of Groningen 6,665 pupils participated. The final score was impressive. The pupils read a total of no less than 53,721 books in ten weeks.

The success of *Score a Book!* has not gone unnoticed in the rest of the Netherlands. In October 2016, the organisation of the Dutch Premier League signed a pledge, in which the 18 Premier League clubs promise to undertake efforts to fight low literacy and to promote reading by means of projects such as *Score a Book!* This promise is an important step in the national roll-out of this sporting project. At the moment, Biblionet Groningen is working with the *Art of Reading* programme and other provincial and local library organizations on a national rollout. The Dutch Premier League clubs PSV Eindhoven, Heracles Almelo and Go Ahead Deventer have already confirmed they would like to participate in *Score a Book!*

Curative approach

As already described above within the *Count on skills* programme there is also a curative approach. In this approach the main goal is to reach 45.000 adults who lack basic skills (reading, writing and digital skills). The National Library of the Netherlands works closely with the Dutch Reading and Writing foundation to close the “skills gap”. The National Library coordinates the nation-wide program *Library and Basic Skills* in which the main goal is to implement a national wide infrastructure in all libraries with a wide range of products and projects to improve the basic skills of vulnerable target groups, such as low literate people, refugees, migrants, unemployed people, the elderly and computer illiterate people. In this infrastructure the Library organizes non-formal educational activities for these target groups. They do this in close cooperation with other important stakeholders at the regional level such as welfare institutions, unemployment institutions, formal adult educational suppliers, local communities and voluntary bodies.

The libraries, as an easily accessible place for all citizens, have the advantage that they are within close proximity for all citizens (approximately 1.9 km on average in the Netherlands) and the help they provide occurs in an informal setting and is often one-to-one. Often adults follow a course in the library as an addition to formal education by formal adult educational institutions.

The role of government institutions in this wide network with all kinds of partners is that they are “finding places” for people who lack basic skills. Vulnerable groups often have to go to welfare to ask for benefits and to do that they have to fill in forms (digital) which they are not able to do. Welfare institutions identify that someone lacks skills and refers them to the Library to follow a course or some other form of support. As stated before the Library provides a broad range of activities. For example, digital courses to teach people how to deal with online government forms, basic internet skills, language cafés in which people chat with each other in an informal setting, job application training, tablet cafés, and network communities for job-applicants. Libraries also provide front office services for people who have questions about e-governance, work-related issues, or people who need help finding the

right institution for benefits, extra allowances and health care. In the following paragraphs we will focus on one of the sub-projects within the program *Library and Basic Skills*, namely the cooperation with the Dutch tax authority.

Cooperation with the Dutch tax authority

In February 2016 the Dutch Tax Authority and the Dutch National Library have come to an agreement in which both parties cooperate in implementing an infrastructure to organize help for people who lack basic (digital) skills. In the Netherlands the Dutch Tax authority is one of the national government institutions has the most developed online service provision. More than 90% of Dutch citizens fill in their tax form online. Unfortunately a lot of them can't do this without help. Reasons include the lack of access to a computer, a lack of the basic digital literacy skills and because they belong to a group of vulnerable adults who will never be able to do it themselves. For these reasons the Dutch Tax authority provided a subsidy of 1.9 million euros made available via the National Library for all the Public Libraries in the Netherlands (154). This project is based on three pillars:

1. Libraries provide access to ICT-infrastructure, so that citizens who do not have access to ICT-facilities can use the facilities in the Library.
2. Libraries provide free courses in digital skills for people who lack those skills.
3. Libraries provide, in cooperation with social- and welfare institutions, information sessions and consultation hours about tax affairs and filling in the (digital) tax form.

The amount of 1.9 million is based on 0.10 € per resident (The Netherlands has 16.9 million residents plus €210.000 for support.). Hence, a city like Amsterdam received €80.000, while a small village of 5.000 residents received € 500.

The project is unique because it is the first project in which a national government institution recognises explicitly that libraries have a role in this domain. It demonstrates that government institutions acknowledge the broad role libraries can play in the provision of services that provide help for vulnerable groups. Secondly, it is unique because it is nation-wide and all libraries in the Netherlands participate. This tax return-period (March May 2017) was the first time libraries provided these services. The results were quite good, especially for the third pillar (giving help to citizens filling in their tax form) where libraries asked for detailed preparation. The first two pillars were already well established in the Library sector and required less preparation.

For most libraries the third pillar was new and they had to develop cooperation with new partners they hadn't worked with before. These partners (like welfare institutions, unions and other social organizations) were not aware of the new role libraries play in today's society and were, therefore a little bit skeptical. So on a local level much lobbying was needed to inform (and convince!) the new partners that the library is more than a distribution centre for books, that it plays an important role in teaching basic skills to citizens and in distributing reliable information.

Citizens on the other hand were very satisfied with the services the libraries offered. In the coming years we want to further develop this project so that we can reach even more people. On the one hand by teaching people the skills so that they will be independent and on the other hand, providing for people who will always need some kind of help. Libraries will be the safety net to provide this help.

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