



Literacy beyond the curriculum: the strength of libraries; Examples from the Netherlands

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114 — *Beyond the United Nations Decade of Literacy: what libraries can do* — Literacy and Reading Section with National Libraries

Abstract:

The UN-decade of Literacy has helped to broaden the definition of reading and reading skills, and to include other ways of 'reading'. This development and variety of literacies has been welcomed by public libraries in the Netherlands. As the main partners for schools, they have developed a broad range of services. Innovation has come with projects which demonstrate that libraries can offer more and something different than schools. Fun and pleasure are the driving force for a different kind of reading and literacy programmes, for individual children and school classes. For every age and every level, for every type of (non)-reader there is an offer which fits. The library based programmes are not developed in opposition but in addition to the school curriculum. In fact, libraries follow this technical reading and literacy curriculum closely, and contribute to the set aims of technical reading skills, language development etc. How are libraries doing this?

They make sure that there are attractive titles and literacy activities proposed to every level of the curriculum. So, there are plays and activities encouraging every child, beginning or more advanced, to enjoy the skills he/she has just learned. The advantage is that libraries can work beyond the curriculum. That's their strength; their scope is beyond school learning. The programmes range from addressing pre-school children to pupils in secondary education.

The continuous reading line is a well established library tool, which serves as a model for a new literacy line: the continuing media literacy line. Knowledge, attitude and skills are part of 'media wisdom'. Partners in cultural education, citizenship, and new media are working with two pilot libraries and three schools to test materials and programmes related to media wisdom. The outcomes and products of these reading and literacy lines will be presented, shared and discussed with IFLA participants.

Universal and international

Reading has many promoters and a long history of all kinds of people who praise the pleasure of books. 'Of the reading of books there is no end, and no end to its delight: I never knew more sweet and happy hours than I employ'd upon my books.' A citation from James Shirley's, *The Lady of Pleasure*, which can be found with many others in Holbrook Jackson's famous 'Book about the books', especially Part III. (Jackson 1981). Reading is for consolation or composure, for amusement and not necessarily study. Without having acquired the power of reading for pleasure, none of us can be independent. This universal power of reading is also taken up by Stephen Krashen (1993), to list the benefits ranging from enjoyment and harmony to high profile students and writers, based on various research reports.

Because reading is a value in itself and also brings so many positive qualities and happiness to human beings, every child, every human being must have access to reading and books as a basic right. This idea has found recall in the international formulations of human rights, in article 19 of the Universal Declaration (1948) on freedom of expression, and especially in article 17 (on access to information) in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The Convention, ratified by all states in the world, except USA and Somalia, acknowledges the child as a human being and bearer of human rights in its own right. Not only protection but also participation are rights to be guaranteed, also in the field of information and education. Article 17 has this double provision: to encourage the positive effects of information and to protect the child from negative effects; and points to the responsibility of all those working in the field of the mass media and providing information and material to children. These include of course, all concerned with the production and dissemination of children's books, as is explicitly mentioned in the Convention. Here is the international framework for efforts of libraries and schools in the fields of reading and literacy. The IFLA Guidelines on library services to children and young adults acknowledge this framework.

Data and research on reading and literacy

In spite of the importance of reading and literacy of all human beings, it is difficult to get an overview of the state of the art, of how this human right is protected and realised. The UNESCO decade of literacy has helped to raise the awareness of literacy and also to collect reliable data on services provided in this respect. It is noted in Europe that 20% of the 15 years old has deficient reading competencies, and too many young people leave schools without diplomas. Research shows for the Netherlands a situation which needs to be improved: 25% weak readers at the end of primary education, and 15- 25 % slow readers, having difficulties in reading. Furthermore 73% in special primary education reading at a low level 5. It has also been found that 15% of 15-years olds cannot read sufficiently. 85% of school leavers without diploma cannot read well. And on a population of 16 million inhabitants, 1,5 of them are low-literate (the majority being of Dutch origin). Some 42% of children never reads at home (32% being the international average) and Dutch children join US children in having the most negative reading attitude. So there is work to do for reading and literacy in the Netherlands.

That is why a reading coalition was established to set standards for better reading results. **Art of Reading** is the national programme to work on continuous reading by libraries and partners. The basic idea behind the programme lines is that reading promotion is most effective through a continuous offer of supportive activities, related to language education. Structural and content based cooperation with stakeholders like government, professionals, health consultations bureaus/ child care centres and educational institutes is the best way to form and execute policies. Reading with pleasure, preferably of culturally valuable texts is also point of departure. The programme lines activities are monitored to provide research data and make the service evidence based. Related to both reading and literacy programmes is the policy to address low literates with dedicated library programmes. These are concrete responses to a national policy combating illiteracy. Libraries cooperate with Centres for Adult Education, organise introductory programmes, relate to immigrants interests and help employability. The financial foundation for these services, however, is increasingly coming under threat. (De Kleijn, 2011)

International research collecting relevant data over the years are the OECD- Pisa studies which compare results of European Countries regarding reading skills of students and their reading proficiency. PISA 2009 finds that the relationship between attending pre-primary school and better student performance at age 15 is strongest in school systems that offer pre-primary education to a larger proportion of the student population, that do so over a longer period of time, that have smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios in pre-primary school and that invest more per child at the pre-primary level of education. In other words: also in this research it is recognised that early childhood programmes improve children's well being, help to create a foundation for lifelong learning and make learning outcomes more equitable.

The UNESCO-decade of Literacy has helped to broaden the definition of reading and reading skills, and to include other ways of 'reading'. This development and variety of literacies has been welcomed by public libraries in the Netherlands. As the main partners for schools, they have developed a broad range of services. Innovation has come with projects which demonstrate that libraries can offer more and something different than schools. Fun and pleasure are the driving force for a different kind of reading and literacy programmes, for individual children and school classes. For every age and every level, for every type of (non)-reader there is an offer which fits. The library based programmes are not developed in opposition but in addition to the school curriculum. In fact, libraries follow closely this technical reading and literacy curriculum, and contribute to the set aims of technical reading skills, language development etc. How are libraries doing this?

Library service following the curriculum for reading and literacy

There is a clear division of tasks when it comes to the various aspects of reading. Technical reading takes place in schools; reading for pleasure is supported by libraries. There are no formal legal regulations between tasks of schools and libraries. In spite of many efforts by librarians, schools seem too busy with themselves and their schedules, to accept and include the library as a fully fledged partner, with professional knowledge on children's literature, reading skills, information seeking etc. A number of libraries have now adapted their reading promotion plans in the sense that they follow the same longitudinal method as is

applied in schools. The library-based programmes follow the young pupils throughout his/her school career with an attractive reading arrangement of activities, challenges etc. General services to schools have always included advice on free reading materials, fiction and non-fiction stock, library school systems, block loans of collections on various themes, to be used in school projects. Libraries cooperate with schools in various national reading promotion campaigns; children can participate individually or via a school class.

Increasingly new services are developed and librarians have learned to 'sell' them to schools, for example, programmes for the very young pupils, including book talks with parents.

Libraries show their strength by providing services which go beyond the traditional school curriculum. Public Libraries make sure that there are attractive titles and literacy activities proposed to every level of the curriculum. So, there are plays and activities encouraging every child, beginning or more advanced, to enjoy the skills he/she has just learned. The advantage is that libraries can work beyond the curriculum. That's their strength; their scope is beyond school learning. The programmes range from addressing pre-school children to pupils in secondary education.

Based on research on language and reading skills, especially among immigrant families, it has become widely known that efforts for promotion of language and reading skills have to start at a very early age. (Scheele, 2011) Therefore, programmes are initiated for baby's and toddlers, continuing in pre-school programmes, to teach the enjoyment of language, rhyme, songs, pictures and story telling and reading aloud. Parents are encouraged and taught how to talk with their children, how to use picture and other books, how to read aloud and use new words. Another example is that grandparents can borrow a suitcase with books, adapted to the age and taste of their grandchildren when they come and stay for a holiday. Very practical handbooks are published which include both theory and practical examples. Libraries also offer information on reading aloud to babies and toddlers on their websites.

Reading to or with seniors is an upcoming phenomenon, especially welcomed by homes for the elderly. Library services include new book programmes with the focus on local history, life biographies etc. Libraries facilitate in the choice of books, training volunteers, and cooperation with institutions for the elderly. Some projects on reminiscence training have also started. Those seniors who can no longer read themselves or have little reading tradition enjoy to be read to by volunteers, librarians etc.

Over the years, the reading promotion policy has been extended to include not only children and young people, but to develop a 'lifelong' curriculum covering programmes and campaigns for people of all ages, and of different attitudes towards reading. For the groups until the end of school age, the reading programmes follow the technical **reading curriculum** at schools, but add the library value of reading for pleasure to it, while supporting reading skills, language development, fantasy and creativity impulses etc. This Continuous Reading programme is a systematic and

structural approach to reading promotion, and helps to keep pleasure in reading for all children.

Stimulated by the IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers (Dutch colleagues have nationally introduced **Boekstart**, as a general welcome for parents and babies to the world of books, libraries and reading. Over 500 libraries have joined the programme. A new phase has begun with offering Boekstart in childcare centres; sixteen centres in three provinces are participating in the pilot services, which will be opened for general use in the second half of 2011.

The University of Leiden has started a 2,5 years research on effectiveness of Boekstart: does the programme encourage partners to start earlier with reading aloud, and does that have an effect on the child's language development?

Apart from this general Boekstart, there is a special programme for low-literate/low-educated families. **Boekenpret** is the reading promotion and language skills improving program in public libraries in the Netherlands. It's focusing on (low-educated) families, both original Dutch and immigrants as well, with children between 0 and 6 years of age. In a local network child health care centres, day care centres, preschools, primary schools and public libraries are working together. The professionals are educated by librarians in a special method on language skills (Taallijn VVE). In all age groups (0-2, 2-4,4-6) there are activities in the children centres and at home, based on specially developed materials.

Collections of picture books are placed within the preschools and day care centres so parents can get used to borrowing a book on a regular basis. Parents are educated step by step in reading aloud, how to use picture books, sing songs etc. Those workshops, (coffee meetings) are organised in the library and the parents receive some new materials monthly, like small books, a hand puppet, flyers etc.

Following the reading curriculum, the pre-primary education reading programme aims at children under 4 years old. The library offers a professional basis for working with books for staff in child care centres: reading aloud, talking about or playing around a story afterwards stimulates language development; safe but exciting stories support children's social-emotional development.

In primary school, the library-based literacy programmes aim at encouraging both children and teachers to do and enjoy story telling, use of picture books, curiosity-raising activities, enriched language etc. **Leesvirus** (reading virus) is the name of one of the exciting programmes. Here, the value of another tool: sustainable reading promotion networks, supported by Art of Reading, demonstrate that literacy is an effort of many people around children. The structural and sustainable cooperation between libraries and schools is based on policy agreements, on the continuous reading programme throughout the educational system and stage of school children and pupils. The libraries carefully monitor the needs and wishes of the schools and adapt their programmes for effectiveness and results. Research is backing up the methods and activities. The simple idea is: pleasure in reading leads to more reading, and then to better reading. As a start 40 libraries and 160 schools are cooperating, and can see the first results in improved readings skills, better writing style, more word variety, better spelling and better knowledge of grammar in the children's expressions and behaviour.

Teachers are encouraged to follow four theme meetings and transform into **reading coordinators** for the library at school. Another tool for schools and childcare centres is a dedicated website with small projects, which fit for their own designed Reading Plan. (www.leesplan.nl)

For the older children in primary education, an additional focus of the reading and literacy programme is on world-orientation, which can also result in doing projects, use of documentation, and cooperate within the school, the municipality or even in the province or other parts of the Netherlands.

Encouraging reading and literacy in secondary education is supported by arrangements of meeting authors, making a book & film project, poetry festival, the Reading Advice machine etc. The subjects of History and Society are also covered and supported by theme collections.

For this age group, the international literature programme **Inktaap** is also available (Netherlands, Flanders, Suriname, Curacao): young people read three winning novels for adults and choose their own favourite; use of social media, internet forum and debate among 160 schools proves to encourage reading and to strengthen reading pleasure. It is one of the signs that reading promotion activities are continuously professionalised. But as Saskia Tellegen remarked: 'We cannot instruct a child to get lost in a book. Absorbed reading, reading for mood control, and remembering those parts of a story that were appealing are phenomena that readers have to discover of their own accord.' We can, however, create favourable circumstances for the pleasure of reading."

New literacy approach: Media wisdom

Apart from reading books, another form of literacy is worth special attention: media literacy which is rapidly becoming a vital skill for Dutch citizens for a leading a social and good life. Therefore some notes on these issues follow as libraries are also involved in this policy.

Educational institutions, cultural institutions and public broadcasters play a role with regard to media literacy in addition to Dutch government. The library also plays a vital role. Libraries can function as spaces where citizens can get more information on media use, support in searching and finding information and knowledge and where they can get acquainted with new innovative media applications. Whereas media education focussed on the younger generation, media literacy applies to the whole population, but media wisdom is the term coined for pointing to the total new attitude citizens have to develop to give new media the (correct) place in their social and cultural life. 'Media wisdom is all knowledge and skills and mentality people need to participate consciously, critically and actively in the world of today and tomorrow, in which media play a decisive role'. (Raad voor Cultuur, 2005)

Dutch libraries are developing services and tools to help pupils and students to work with the new media both in schools and for leisure. For the school activities the programme **Biebsearch** has been developed, bringing mediawisdom, literacy and content together. Programmes are available for adult education, secondary education, and end 2011 the pilot for primary education: Biebsearch junior will be

completed. For young people in vocational education (VMBO), in general with little reading habit and few skills, the programme '**My life story**' has successfully been introduced by public libraries in those schools.

That wisdom is needed, becomes clear when one realises that, according to a European study 77% of 13-16 years old, and 38% of 9-12 years old participate actively in Europe wide social networks on the internet. Media competence and wisdom are also a policy aim for Europe up to 2020.

In the Netherlands, a network of national partners, including public libraries, form a National Centre of Expertise, and execute the Media Wisdom Programme and Plan 2008-2010 and further. Target groups are children, young people, (grand)parents, teachers, caregivers, seniors, socially deprived people, civil society and media professionals. The three programme lines are: media skills and media awareness, stimulating and activating participation, and innovation. Initiatives are clustered around eight themes including: safe use, participation and production, privacy, copyright, empowerment and experimental media use.

Funds are available for pilot projects for less developed themes for certain target groups, e.g. youth and participation. The whole programme is visualised in a media wisdom chart. (<http://mediawijsheidexpertisecentrum.nl/expertisecentrum>). Best practices have been collected, among which libraries play their part. (Van Kleef, 2010)

Research has collected data on the needs for media wisdom, especially for the group 10-14 years old and their parents. What do they know about new media, how do they communicate and discuss the use; what do they want to learn and how? The results show that libraries can help in professionalising and standardising services. Programmes are developed to create 'media coaches' in every school, which help to include media wisdom in the teaching and learning activities. A number of activities can also take place in 'skoolzones', which are dedicated places and facilities in public libraries, where school children 8-12 years old are guided and helped with their school assignments and media use, in a non-school environment. (Mill, 2010).

Media wisdom is for all ages. A campaign for seniors aimed at improving their literacies. 'Through internet, you keep participating', promoted by VIPs, is the slogan for becoming literate and media wise. Moving, exciting personal stories about the internet are told on public broadcasting to inspire seniors to start and connect to Internet. Dutch Libraries are increasingly preparing dedicated services to this growing target group.

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Websites

www.biebsearch.nl: Biebsearch is the name for media literacy and learning
programmes, cooperation of schools and libraries

www.boekenpret.nl Boekenpret is a specialised programme: reading skills in low
literate families

www.boekstart.nl: Information about reading aloud to very Young children. Related to
the Boek start programme.

www.digivaardigdigibewust.nl/Nieuws/campagne_voor_senioren_door_internet_blijf_je_meedoen: Media wisdom senior campaign:

www.doorgaandeleeslijn.nl: Continuous reading programme:

www.kunstvanlezen.nl: Art of Reading, programme, brochures

www.leesplein.nl: Children's literature for 0-16 years old, and information for parents
and professionals

www.leesvirus.nl: a digital reading project for primary education; with schools
competition, coordinated by the local library. .

www.mylifestory.nl: reading and literacy programme for VMBO (vocational education)

www.virtueelplatform.nl/en/: Virtual platform for media wisdom activities, e- learning
etc.

www.voorleesvogel.nl: Reading aloud programme including website, films and
handbook.

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Marian Koren is senior adviser at the Netherlands Public Library Association, and secretary of FOBID Netherlands Library Forum, including the International Office. Her main interest is in the Child's perspective and participation in library services, based on children's human rights.