

The Art of Reading, The National Dutch Reading Promotion Program

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The Art of Reading (Kunst van Lezen in Dutch) is a national reading promotion program in the Netherlands targeting children and youngsters from birth to 18 years of age (focussing on 0-12).

The Art of Reading consists of three components:

1. BoekStart - Bookstart (parents from babies, professionals in healthcare centres and preschool/day-care centres)
2. De Bibliotheek op school - The Library in School (primary, secondary and vocational schools)
3. Strategische leesbevorderingsnetwerken - Strategic reading promotion networks

Below, we describe the program's background, ambitions, and the central role of the local public library in its development and execution. A separate section is devoted to the digital monitoring system that has been created to monitor the impact of the programme on pupils' reading behaviour and teachers' reading promotion behaviour. The appendix contains more information about the building blocks of Bookstart and The Library in School.



The Art of Reading and the Dutch Reading Foundation

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on a structural approach to reading promotion, inspired by such trends as the growing importance attached to the accountability of public institutions, the concern about the language performance of school-going children and adolescents and the rise of functional illiteracy (low literacy) in the population at large (Buisman e.a., 2013). Policymakers 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 program in 2008. The Art of Reading not only aims to promote a love of reading, but also to improve language performance and prevent and reduce low literacy. 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 (pre)schools and libraries. Thus, by linking national and local literacy goals to the structural work of libraries, The Art of Reading aligns with the Public Library Manifesto¹ (IFLA/UNESCO) and also with the Policy document from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)².



Core elements of The Art of Reading, which are derived from this research base, are: the reading environment (materials as well as behaviors); the reading plan (a structured rationale, policy and action plan at school level);

¹ [IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022.pdf](#)

² [Using libraries to support national literacy efforts - UNESCO Digital Library](#)

a monitoring system (the Bookstart and Library in School monitor); and professional support for schools by the local library. The Art of Reading is carried out by the Reading Foundation (founded in 1988, to promote reading in Dutch and Frisian, particularly among the 0-20 age group) and The National Library - KB (Koninklijke Bibliotheek). The Art of Reading is funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The programme promotes reading aloud, free voluntary reading and information literacy for children.

The Art of Reading is based on insights from research on the impact of reading on language development (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Krashen, 2004) and the effect of school libraries on pupil outcomes (Lance, 1993), evaluation studies of the British Bookstart programme (Wade & Moore, 2000) and research on the impact of storybook reading (Bus et al., 1995; Jordon et al, 2000). Since the start of the programme, further research has appeared on the effects of leisure time reading (Mol & Bus, 2011). Bookstart and The Library in School are researched as well (see below under the subheading Evidence).

Demographics and the public library in The Netherlands 2023

17,855,000 inhabitants

342 municipalities

137 local library organizations

12 provinces with 8 Provincial supporting Library institutes

1 National Library (Koninklijke Bibliotheek) and 1 Library Association (VOB)

3.4 million Library members (63% youth)

Count on skills action programme

Approximately 1.8 million³ residents (10%) of the Netherlands between the ages of 16 and 65 and 740,000 residents 65+ have low literacy skills. They struggle to read, write and communicate in the Dutch language (LES, 2021).

The Tel mee met Taal (Count on Skills) action programme (2016-2019, extended to 2024) is a joint effort of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, The Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, intended to prevent the marginalisation of people with limited literacy and digital skills. Count on Skills⁴ focuses on three domains (family, employment and healthcare). In 2016, The Art of Reading was incorporated into the Count on Skills programme. By the end of 2022, the two programmes reaches about 920,000 children.

Programme Parts of The Art of Reading (see the appendix for more substantive information)

BoekStart for babies

All 137 library organizations with about 744 library locations give a small Bookstart suitcase to parents of new borns (from 3 months old) if the baby will be a new member of the library. In the suitcase there are two books and information about reading aloud to baby's. In total about 41% (74.500 suitcases) of the Dutch babies collected this suitcase in 2022.

BoekStart in preschool institutions

82% of the libraries is carrying out this programme part. They reach 3,329 (40.6%) of 8.207 preschool institutions in their working area.

The Library in School primary schools

91% of the libraries is carrying out this programme part. They reach 3,528 (57,1%) of 6,177 primary schools in their working area.

³ [Reading and Writing foundation | Stichting Lezen en Schrijven](#)

⁴ [Count on Skills: the Dutch policy paper on new action programme to prevent marginalisation of low literates | EPALÉ \(europa.eu\)](#)

The Library in School secondary schools

Because the focus is on reading promotion for children from 0 till 12 years of age, the Library in School for secondary schools (12-18 years of age) is much smaller. 77 of 135 libraries (56%) is carrying out this programme part. They reach 260 (27%) of 927 secondary schools in their working area.

Families at risk

A special action line within the Art of Reading aims to prevent low literacy in families at risk. In short, the joint efforts of four 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 Continuous (ongoing) Reading Line

The Reading Foundation has developed the Continuous (ongoing) Reading Line 0-18 years (Dormolen et al., 2005, updated version Van Montfoort et al. 2020), in which it has set out its vision with regard to reading promotion as a continuous stimulus for this whole age group. The Continuous 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 (figure 2).

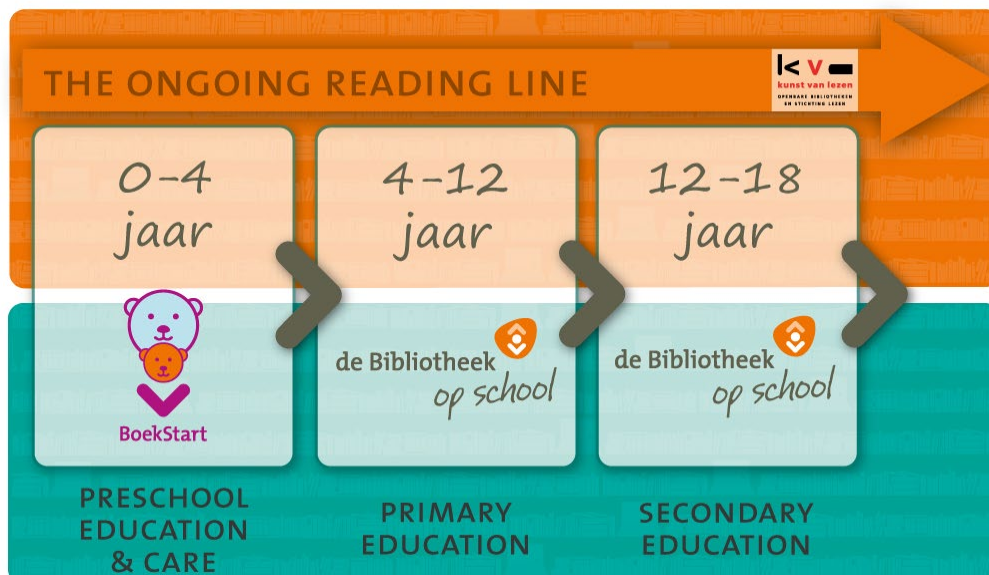


Figure 2: The continuous (ongoing) reading line

The pillars of The Art of Reading

The Art of Reading has defined four interconnected 'pillars' to support successful reading promotion. In Dutch the four initial letters of the pillars constitute the word LEES (READ):

- Leesomgeving (the reading environment, including the quality and quantity 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, 2015). The reading environment also comprises time and space for reading (Chambers, 1991). Within the reading environment, 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 (e.g. 'school libraries impact studies' on www.lrs.org). The Art of Reading has initiated the development of training courses and workshops in order to professionalise library staff, childcare

professionals and teachers and has hosted conferences to call attention to the importance of fostering structural approaches in reading promotion.

Evidence

Authorities increasingly call for proof of the effects of reading promotion. Two PhD research studies of the effects of Bookstart⁵ and The Library at School⁶ were initiated, recently followed by new Bookstart research which will be published in Dutch in the fall of 2022. The Art of Reading has also commissioned the development of digital monitoring instruments to provide insight into the development of the reading motivation and behaviour of the target groups (see below). Brochures, fact sheets and research surveys have been published, such as *Meer lezen, beter in taal* ('Better in language by reading more' in childcare, primary, secondary and vocational education, all written by Kees Broekhof who is also the initiator of the monitoring instruments). Practical brochures published by the Reading Foundation under the name of *Kwestie van Lezen* ('Reading Matters') are widely used by libraries.

Collaboration (strategic)

Libraries work together with various local partners. By setting up a strategic literacy/reading promotion network, centred around the library, and involving politicians, stakeholders from day-care centres, healthcare organisations, cultural organisations and educational institutions, the programmes are more solidly embedded in local policy and easier to finance (see figure 3).

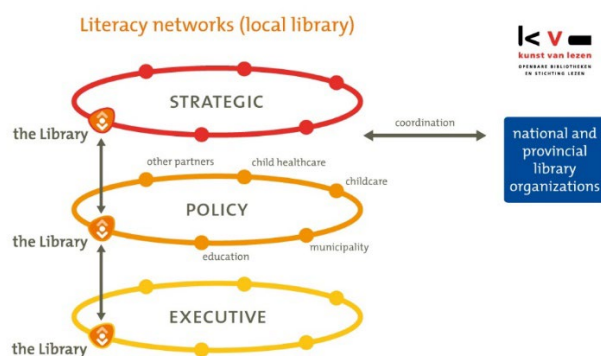


Figure 3: Literacy networks

The Library in school Monitor – Kees Broekhof, senior advisor with Sardes ([Sardes English information](#))

The Library in school Monitor is a digital internet instrument to collect annually data on pupil reading behaviour, teacher reading promotion behaviour, school reading promotion policies and school libraries (run in collaboration with public library staff). Libraries and schools can use these data to evaluate the results of their cooperative work and to make decisions about steps to take in order to enhance the effectiveness of their collaboration. There is also a monitoring instrument for vocational education locations and for teachers education locations. In this paper we focus on preschool (day-care centers), primary and secondary education.

The Library in school monitor – primary education

Ten rounds of data collection between 2012-2022

Participants in the 2021-2022 monitor in 2,130 primary schools:

- 132,960 pupils (age 9-12)
- 19,125 teachers
- 1,725 reading consultants (public library staff)

The Library in school monitor – secondary education

Six rounds of data collection between 2014-2022.

Participants in the 2021-2022 monitor in 72 secondary schools:

⁵ Van den Berg/Bus: Beneficial effects of Bookstart in temperamentally highly reactive infants: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1041608014001873>

⁶ Nielen/Bus: Enriched School Libraries: A Boost to Academic Achievement: journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2332858415619417

- 10,840 pupils
- 785 teachers
- 40 public library staff

The monitor collects information on the following topics:

Pupils

- reading motivation
- reading frequency
- visits to public and school libraries
- home reading culture
- perception of school library
- information skills

Teachers

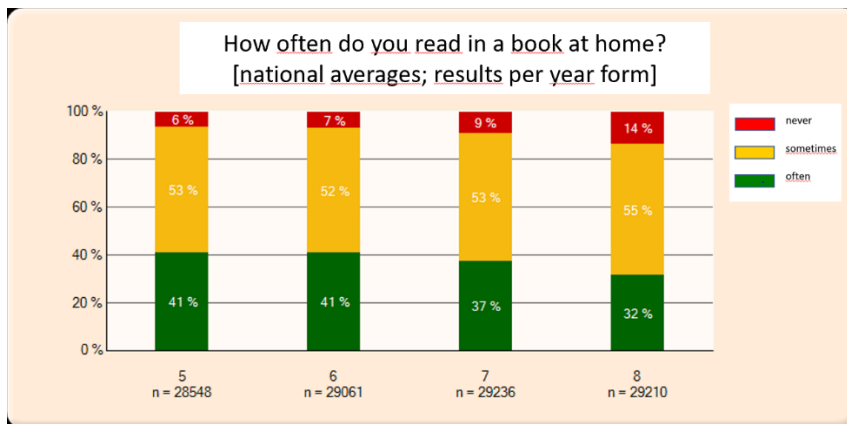
- reading promotion behaviour in the classroom
- information skills
- information teaching skills
- perception of the school library

Library staff

- the school library (e.g., collection, opening hours, staffing)
- school reading promotion policy
- school media education policy
- pupils’ book borrowing rates
- library services offered to schools

Data collection and feedback

The library collects the data once per year, through digital questionnaires administered to pupils, teachers and library staff. A specialized agency prepares concise standardized reports for each school in the monitor, showing key data set off against national averages (see figure 4). Libraries can also create tailored reports, geared to a school’s specific priorities. The reading consultant from the local library presents the results to the teachers.



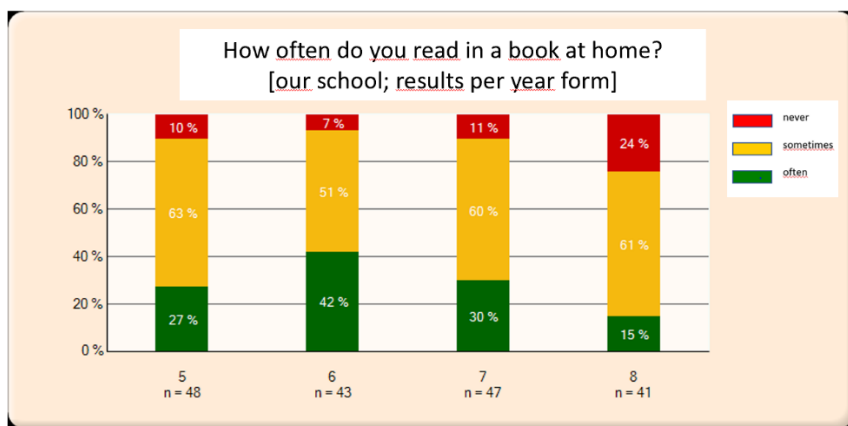


Figure 4: A page from the standard report for school X: leisure time reading frequencies per form, national averages (top) and for school X ('our school') for groups 5 (9 years), 6 (10 years), 7 (11 years) and 8 (12 years).

Data output levels

Data in the monitor can be viewed at six levels:

1. national level
2. provincial level
3. municipal level
4. library region level (does not always coincide with municipal borders)
5. school level
6. classroom level (also by gender).

The Bookstart monitor in preschool institutions

Let us finally have a brief look at the monitor used in preschool agencies, i.e. preschool playgroups and day-care centres. The data are collected through digital questionnaires administered to three groups of respondents: staff working in preschool playgroups and day-care, reading aloud coordinators (employed by the preschool agency) and Bookstart coordinators (the librarian involved from the public library).

The Bookstart monitor for preschool institutions

Seven rounds of data collection between 2015-2022

Participants in the 2021-2022 Bookstart monitor in 975 day-care centers:

- early childhood workers: 2,565
- reading aloud coordinators (preschool staff): 815
- Bookstart coordinators (librarians): 80

Information in the Bookstart monitor

The questionnaires in the Bookstart monitor elicit the following types of information:

Early childhood workers

- group characteristics
- reading aloud practice (e.g. frequency, organisation, method)
- observed children's behaviour with books
- contacts with parents

Reading aloud coordinator

- agency's policies regarding Bookstart (e.g. staff hours, inservice training, policy plan)
- reading aloud environment (e.g. presence of a reading corner)
- book collection

Bookstart coordinator (librarian)

- library's policies regarding Bookstart (e.g. staffing, funding)

- cooperation with other local organisations
- inservice training provision for early childhood staff working with Bookstart

Use of the Bookstart monitor data

The outcomes of the Bookstart monitor are available to the local library and, through the library, to the preschool agencies with which the library works. This information can be used in the same way as the data collected in primary schools and secondary schools. This type of usage was explained in the previous sections and requires no repetition here.

The monitor data can also be used to gain a picture of practice and policy in the sectors concerned at the national level, to evaluate and reconsider its policies at the national level. The data are also used by the national coordinator to decide which parts of the programme require specific attention or even additional investments. For example, one of the outcomes of the monitor was that over half of preschool staff never make use of digital storybooks, even though research has repeatedly shown the benefits of digital storybooks (e.g. Mayer et al., 2005; Smeets & Bus, 2012; Verhallen et al., 2004). The monitor findings prompted the national coordinator to set up an 'acceleration project' in which ten preschool agencies were given special support to boost the use of digital storybooks. The project was successfully implemented in 2018-2019; the results were disseminated through a national conference and through the online toolboxes for librarians.

The monitor as a multi-purpose instrument

Above we have described how the Library in school monitor and the Bookstart monitor can be used as a powerful multi-purpose instrument for optimising the collaboration between libraries, schools and preschool agencies, providing libraries and their partners with rich data on children, early childhood professionals, teachers, schools and school libraries. It can be used as a working instrument, for making practical decisions about school-library cooperation at the everyday work level; as a policy instrument, for collecting baseline data, formulating policies, evaluating policies and accounting to local authorities; and as a research instrument, for conducting analyses to inform national project management and the scholarly community. At the local level, decisions taken on the basis of monitor data can be followed up by choosing materials, projects, activities and services which can be found in the variegated toolboxes for librarians that are part of the Bookstart and Library in school programmes. Local public libraries also use monitor data to participate in dialogues with local governments about strategies to combat functional illiteracy – a role that is considered important as part of national literacy efforts (UIL, 2016). Many of the possibilities the monitor offers for informing policy and practice at the national and provincial levels have yet to be explored.

Note

The concept of the Library in school Monitor was developed by Kees Broekhof from Sardes Educational Services, Utrecht, and Thomas van Dalen consulting, Amsterdam, commissioned by The Art of Reading programme. The technical infrastructure was developed by DESAN Research Solutions, Amsterdam.

Websites:

[BoekStart stimuleert lezen met baby's en peuters / www.boekstartpro.nl /](http://www.boekstartpro.nl/)

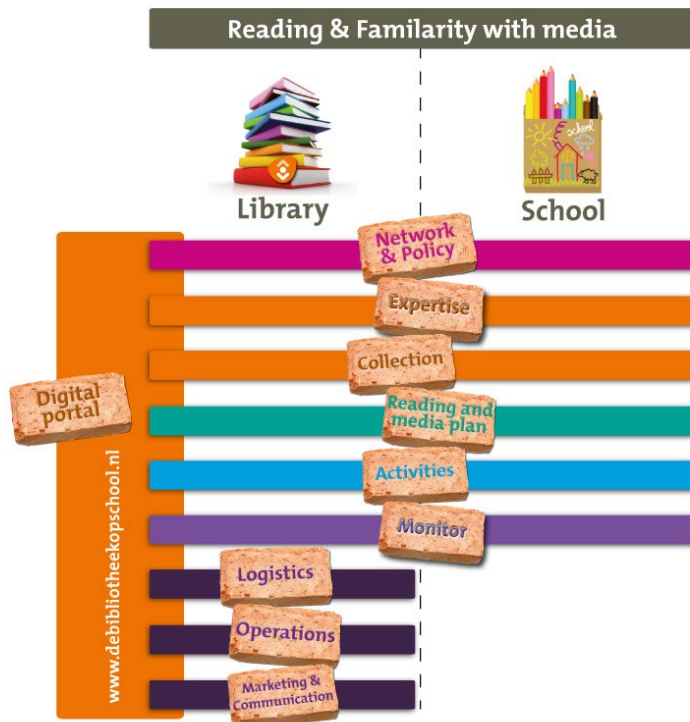
<https://pro.debibliotheekopschool.nl/> www.lezen.nl

English information about The Reading Foundation: <https://www.lezen.nl/dutch-reading-foundation/>

Appendix: Information about Bookstart and The Library in School

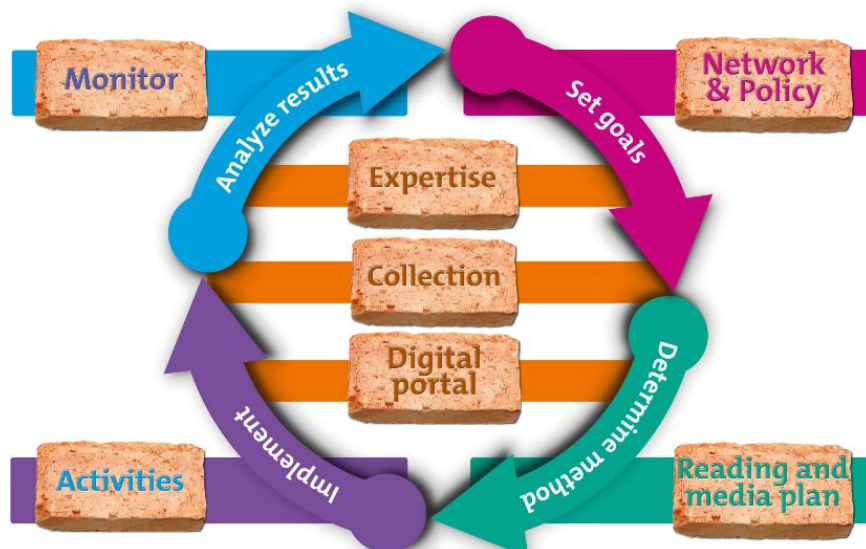
The building blocks of the programmes

The Bookstart and The Library in School programmes comprise ten interconnected building blocks:



Seven of the building blocks (Digital portal, Network & Policy, Expertise, Collection, Reading and media plan, Activities and Monitor) are the joint responsibility of the school or preschool/ day-care centre and the library. The remaining three blocks are the responsibility of the library alone: Logistics, Operations and Marketing & Communication. The school or preschool closes a contract with the library. Against an agreed fee per child (which may differ per municipality), the school or preschool acquires a library, trained staff, two to four hours professional support by a reading consultant from the library, a collection of three to five books per pupil, activities etc.

When the building blocks are arranged in a PCDA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) cycle, the following picture emerges:



Bookstart in The Netherlands (BoekStart in Dutch)

Inspired by the British Bookstart programme (Wade & Moore, 2000, 2003), the Dutch BoekStart promotes early reading, storytelling and singing nursery rhymes to very young children. It also enables parents and children to experience the pleasure of reading books together. It gives young children a better start in primary school and strengthens the bond between parents and children.

Scientific research into the effects of the Dutch BoekStart programme (Van den Berg & Bus, 2015) has shown that:

- participating parents are more likely to start reading to their children at an early age
- children's language skills improve if parents start reading to their babies before the age of eight months
- the effects of BoekStart are even stronger in the longer term
- overactive babies benefit most from the programme
- participating parents visit the library more often and are more familiar with baby books.

About 57,500 parents (one out of three parents of new borns) took up the invitation in 2021 to go to the library, register their baby, and collect a small suitcase containing two baby books and information on reading to babies. All of the 140 Dutch library organizations carry out BoekStart for babies.



BoekStart in preschools/day-care centres also focuses on toddlers in playgrounds and other institutions. By the end of schoolyear 2021, 118 library organisations (84%) were participating together with 3,145 (38%) of day-care centres in their working area.

Quality in the implementation of BoekStart is determined by six elements:

- an attractive reading spot, created together with the library
- a high quality collection of books for babies and toddlers (including eBooks)
- increased expertise of staff through training
- active parental involvement, resulting in more frequent storybook reading at home and familiarity with the opportunities offered by the library
- reading aloud as a daily routine through the establishment of a Reading Plan which outlines the agency's policy
- cooperation with local partners in a reading promotion network (local municipality, healthcare, library and day-care centres).



The Library in School

The impact of reading on language development has been extensively investigated (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Mol & Bus, 2011). Research studies consistently show that frequent reading correlates with positive developments in various domains of language development, such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, decoding skills, spelling, grammatical knowledge and writing skills (Krashen, 2004; Mol & Bus 2001; Kortlever & Lemmens, 2012). This evidence constitutes the scientific rationale behind the Dutch 'Library in school' programme.

Launched in 2009, The Library in school is a national programme aiming to promote reading and to professionalise the approach to reading promotion in primary and secondary schools, by improving cooperation between schools and public libraries and by creating high quality libraries in schools. Libraries and schools work closely together to improve the language skills and media literacy of children aged 4-18 years⁷. They do so by fostering a love of reading (in the case of young children, a love of being read to), both at school and at home, as lasting effects on children's language development require a joint effort by parents and schools. Of all 142 library organisations, 128 (90%) participate in this programme for primary schools, involving over 3,400 primary schools. This means over 53% of the 6,540 Dutch primary schools in their working area. 74 (52%) of the 142 organizations are carrying out the programme in secondary schools. They reach 255 (24%) of 1,050 secondary schools in their working area.

⁷ Primary schools in the Netherlands serve children from 4 to 12 years old.



note on school libraries in the Netherlands

School libraries in the Netherlands are generally not run by teacher-librarians, as in many other countries. They may be run by a librarian from the public library, by volunteers (parents), by pupils or by a school librarian (whose professional background is not necessarily school library work or teaching). In the Library in School programme the trained reading consultant from the nearby local library is, together with a teacher (reading coordinator), responsible for the library work in the school.

The Library in school in primary schools

As part of The Library in School programme, the primary school and library sign a contract for several years in which they agree to work together on:

- developing a joint policy in relation to reading at school, in the library and at home
- providing an up-to-date and attractive collection, to enrich reading education
- providing books and other materials that can be taken home
- displaying books with their covers fully visible on movable bookshelves
- providing a reading consultant attached to the library to assist the school's reading coordinator (a teacher)
- setting annual targets based on monitored results
- specifying all the reading promotion activities in an annual reading and media plan
- providing a digital portal to: facilitate searching and registering materials; stimulate reading; keep track of children's borrowing history; and help finding reliable information.

A research study on the results and effect of The Library in school has shown that the results in terms of promoting the development of reading skills are positive. All pupils in schools that participate in The Library in School attain higher language scores than pupils in schools that do not participate. The strongest positive effects are found among girls: not only do their language skills improve, but their motivation to read during their leisure time as well (Nielen & Bus, 2015).

The Library in school in secondary schools

The Library in school has also been introduced in secondary schools. Just as in the primary education sector, the programme involves strategic long-term cooperation between schools and libraries, with the aim to improve the quality of education in the domain of reading promotion. More specifically, the aim is to improve the achievement of secondary school pupils in the domains of:

- reading skill
- language skill
- media/information literacy

Also, just as in the primary education version of The Library at School, participating secondary schools are required to establish, together with the library, a strategic reading and media plan that specifies the steps that are needed to create an optimum reading and media environment in the school. In short, cooperation between libraries and secondary schools involves:

- structural cooperation between the school, the library and the local government
- aimed at improving pupils' reading, language, information and media skills
- structural focus on reading and media literacy (included in lesson schedule)
- tailored collection of books and other materials
- library membership for all pupils and teachers
- materials can be used at school and at home
- at least half of the collection is physically present in school for borrowing; the remaining part is either physically present or can be reserved through the e-books portal of Bibliotheek.nl
- results are monitored
- annually adjusted reading and media plan including goals and activities derived from monitored outcomes
- close cooperation between a trained reading coordinator (school teacher), librarian (school staff member) and reading consultant (from the public library)
- close cooperation between a trained media coach or school librarian and public library staff

The Library in school for institutions for vocational education and for Colleges of Education for teachers in primary schools

The last couple of years The Reading Foundation has developed the Library in school for the above mentioned institutions, also carried out by local and provincial libraries. These are growing activities.

For more information please contact: alangendonk@lezen.nl or adriaan.langendonk@kb.nl

Adriaan is working with The Reading Foundation and The National Library KB in Amsterdam and The Hague.

He is the program manager of BoekStart (Bookstart) and de Bibliotheek op school (The Library in School), two major reading promotion programs in the Netherlands, financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). He is also responsible for building strategic networks around these programs, together with governments and libraries on a national, provincial and local level to ensure structural and sustainable assurance. Internationally he is active in IFLA as a standing committee member of the Literacy & Reading section (chair 2017-2021): [Literacy and Reading Section – IFLA](#).