

Let's read! A call for a reading offensive

24 June 2019

Young people in the Netherlands are reading less and less often and with less and less enjoyment. Although they do read lots of short texts – messages on their smartphones or brief summaries in school textbooks – they spend less time on 'deep reading': thoughtful, concentrated reading of longer texts or books. This is leading to a decline in their reading skills. That in turn has an impact on their functioning at school and in society, and ultimately also on the functioning of Dutch society as a whole.

It is not made easy for young people to become motivated to engage in deep reading, with extensive cutbacks in libraries and a reduction in the attention for and time spent on language and literature in schools. This is particularly problematic for young people who do not grow up in a reading culture at home.

There are good examples in all sectors of schools and other organisations, including libraries, which do encourage young people to read. Mostly, however, the efforts made in this area are neither sufficiently intensive nor sufficiently systematic. The Council for Culture and the Education Council are therefore calling for an offensive to stimulate and motivate young people to engage in deep reading. This must involve not only teachers from all sectors of education, but also parents, educational staff in childcare facilities, school media library officers, library staff and teaching assistants. There is a need for powerful collaboration between these actors, with a key role for central government as well.

The Council for Culture and the Education Council make three recommendations to create a strong infrastructure to stimulate reading motivation.

Pursue a powerful, cohesive policy on reading

Schools have an important task in promoting reading. However, they must not be left to do this alone; boosting reading motivation must be a core policy focus for government, local authorities, schools and libraries acting together. Their mission is to develop provisions which encourage all pupils to engage in deep reading. This requires a powerful, structural policy as well as additional financial investments.

Schools have limited capacity to increase pupils' reading motivation. It is therefore up to the government to provide generous, long-term funding to organisations which support schools. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring good library provision; this is a 'chain service' at regional level. Apart from libraries, there is also a role for organisations providing support services to schools and childcare facilities, as well as for parents, welfare organisations and other local players involved with children and adolescents.

Collaboration should be automatic and not dependent on individual initiatives.

Provide a rich array of reading material

The Councils call for young people to be offered a rich array of reading material throughout their school careers, in the form of books and longer narrative texts, whether paper-based or digital. It is the task of publishers to provide a diverse range of reading material which meets the interests of young people from different backgrounds. The Dutch Foundation for Literature (Letterenfonds) has a role to play here, where necessary supported by the government.

Schools and supporting organisations could work together to ensure that there are sufficient incentives for young people to actually make use of the available reading material. An active campaign involving 'reading ambassadors'

visiting the classroom could be useful here.

Establish a reading culture

Young people are more inclined to read when they are surrounded by a reading culture. A reading culture not only involves books, but also adults who act as reading promoters. The Council also advises schools to bring in reading specialists. To ensure the quality of these reading specialists and reading promoters, it is important that they are properly trained and given sufficient time to perform their tasks.