

Abstract

The Educational Function of Libraries in Focus

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'Lifelong learning' is one of the core activities of public libraries. This study was commissioned to gain a up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the role libraries play in education. The study consisted of a quantitative part - an online survey addressed to all 162 basic libraries - and a qualitative part - nine interviews with libraries that had either developed a special approach to learning or a project that promoted learning. Over half (56%) of the libraries participated in the study.

Facilities

This study examined the extent to which libraries have facilities that can be used to shape education.

Almost 80% of the libraries have quiet areas with PCs for individuals at all or at least a few of their branches. On the other hand, 50% of the libraries stated that they do not have special study and educational areas at any of their branches. An average of 25% of the libraries indicated that they do not have a separate training room or reception area for groups at any of their branches. Although this is more often the case for smaller libraries (60%), 20% of the large to very large libraries stated that they do not have such rooms or areas at any of their branches either. And finally, it is worth noting that 35% of the libraries believe that none of their branches have facilities that stimulate adults to further educate or develop themselves.

Thus, a large number of library branches in the Netherlands do not have facilities that promote education.

This study also examined the availability of digital information. This item scored a lot better. Some 90% of the libraries provide access to the internet, to the library's own collection, to the collections of other libraries and to national databanks at all of their branches.

International databanks on the other hand, cannot be accessed at any of the libraries' branches.

Educational programmes

This study also assessed the extent to which libraries offer educational programmes. A distinction was made between a general programme and a programme for special target groups.

General programmes

Almost all of the libraries offer reading groups, writers evenings, poetry evenings and theme meetings at one or more of their branches. About half of the libraries offer internet training at all or at least a few of their branches.

Noteworthy is that seventy-five per cent of the libraries do not offer language courses at any of their branches.

Programmes for special target groups

In addition to general education programmes, this study looked at programmes for special target groups. The target groups involved in this study consisted of people with a reading disability (dyslexia), non-native speakers, illiterate people, and seniors.

Seventy-five per cent of the libraries offer a programme for seniors at all or a few of their branches. Seventy per cent also offer a programme for people with a reading disability. Slightly more than half of the libraries offer a special programme for illiterate people, and 40% of the libraries offer a programme for non-native speakers at all or a few of their branches. Twenty-five per cent of the libraries do not offer a programme for non-native speakers at any of their branches.

Promoting reading

Libraries actively promote reading. Seventy to eighty per cent of the libraries promote reading in a variety of ways at a few or all of their branches.

Education partners

The libraries were asked to state the education partners they work with and to describe what the collaboration consists of. The focus was on collaboration with schools and other educational establishments, healthcare and welfare organizations, cultural organizations and a number of other organizations.

Schools and other educational establishments

More than 80% of the libraries work with primary schools at all of their branches. In many cases, at least one of the branches works with a lower secondary professional school (VMBO), a higher general secondary/pre-university school (HAVO/VWO) and a regional education centre for basic and adult education (ROC).

None of the libraries' branches support vocational courses for intermediate vocational (MBO) and ROC students. Of 75% of the libraries, none of the branches work with higher vocational schools (HBO), and of 90% of the libraries, none of the branches work with universities.

The collaboration with other educational establishments was also examined. Of all of the education partners, the libraries work most with art centres and special schools and least with adult education centres and language schools.

Healthcare and welfare organizations

The collaboration with healthcare and welfare organizations was also put into perspective. Striking is that the libraries collaborate more with these organizations than with educational establishments.

A number of the libraries' branches, and in some cases all of a library's branches, work with playgroups, daycare centres and clinics. The libraries and their branches collaborate significantly less with youth care offices, youth and family centres and youth information points.

Cultural organizations

Of 40% of the libraries, some or all of the branches work with museums, local history centres, centres for cultural history, and theatres, and of 30% of the libraries, one of the branches works with such organizations. Some 30% of the libraries do not work with any of these cultural organizations at any of their branches. Fifty per cent of the libraries do not work with music podiums at any of their branches.

Other organizations

Finally, the study also examined the collaboration with three very different organizations: UWV Werkbedrijf (Dutch Jobcentre Plus), independent job counsellors and (children's) bookstores. The libraries work with bookstores on a large scale, and considerably less with Jobcentre Plus and job counsellors.

Differences between the provinces

There are clear differences in the way the provinces shape the libraries' educational function in terms of the facilities, the programmes offered (especially for the special target groups) and the collaboration partners. Chapter 6 describes the most striking differences.

Good examples

In addition to the quantitative part, which consisted of an online survey, this study also had a qualitative part. Nine interviews were conducted with representatives of various libraries. The Netherlands Public Library Association recommended these libraries be invited for an interview because they had either developed a special approach to learning or a project that promoted learning. The interviews produced a number of good examples of educational collaboration. The factors that make such projects a success and the things that are needed to roll out such projects across the country were also examined.

Conclusions and recommendations

In terms of the facilities, many of the libraries' branches are not laid out in a way that stimulates learning.

Libraries already offer special programmes for seniors and people with a reading disability (dyslexia) in many places in the Netherlands. This applies less to programmes for illiterate people and non-native speakers.

Libraries work closely with a variety of local partners and are thus well-established in the community.

There is a lot of collaboration with primary schools, playgroups, daycare centres and clinics. The collaboration consists mainly of promoting reading and pre- and early-school education based on nationally available, well-developed programmes.

There is a lot less collaboration with other educational establishments, and in particular with HBOs and universities. There is also very little collaboration with language schools and adult education centres (which mainly offer language courses).

A lot of libraries also work with various cultural organizations, although the offer is often less extensive and only available at *one* branch.

Few libraries work with independent job counsellors and Jobcentre Plus. The results are good in the areas in which there is such collaboration.

It is obvious that the provinces made different choice when they decided which educational aspects to focus on. Some of the special target groups can find what they need in more libraries in one province than in another. The availability of educational facilities also varies significantly between the provinces.

Finally, there are a lot of creative forms of educational collaboration in many areas in the Netherlands that could be rolled out to other parts of the country.

Many libraries offer a reading hotline for children and youths. This, combined with their low threshold, puts public libraries in an excellent position to promote reading and fight language deficiency and illiteracy.

Because adults are also illiterate, and development and education take place throughout a person's life, it is important that libraries offer an education hotline for all age groups. A programme that is more targeted at adults and non-native speakers and that stimulates literacy, the naturalization process and being part of a community. Public libraries are so established in the local community that they are perfect candidates for this role. Libraries can also play a meaningful role for people who want to develop further at some stage in their life.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations were made to further strengthen the libraries' educational function:

- When setting up special areas and collections, libraries need to focus on ways of stimulating visitors to further develop or educate themselves.
- Expand and improve the (national) programme for non-native speakers.
- Collaborate more and better with language schools and adult education centres (Volksuniversiteit).
- Stimulate collaboration with HBOs and universities, for example, in the area of internships and innovation.
- Further roll-out of the WerkZat (jobcounselling) project, which has proven to deliver good results.
- Link the programmes for the different target groups, for example,
 - for secondary education students and WerkZat and
 - for non-native speakers/future citizens and WerkZat.This will enable libraries to provide good information and assistance to people who want to enter a different phase of their life.
- The nationwide development of special programmes and material tailored to the different target groups (e.g. for secondary education, adults and non-native speakers) and adapted to the different levels of learning (similar to existing programmes for primary school and pre- and early-school education).
- Each province needs to catch up in the areas in which they have fewer programmes for specific target groups.
- Fight illiteracy not through individual projects but by developing a new type of activity and making it one of the libraries' regular tasks, including a well-developed national offer of special materials.
- Use structural funding to bring the libraries' educational function (especially in the area of illiteracy and non-native speakers) up to the same level and anchor it in the local community.