

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIELD OF LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION**

### **State of the art in the Netherlands**

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**CINOP\***

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## 1 Introduction

Literacy, broadly defined as the basic knowledge and skills needed by all, is necessary for individuals to function independently in society. With the rapid expansion of globalisation, high levels of literacy are of increased importance in today's economy.

The development of literacy and basic education, as well as the professional development of literacy teachers, is diffuse in EU countries. By describing current teacher training approaches, concepts and best practice examples in the participating countries, as well as in other European countries which have developed structures and national action plans the aim is:

- Explore the competences/skills literacy and basic education teachers need
- Develop and implement five basic modules for teacher training in the field of literacy and basic education
- Create a model for teacher training for literacy teachers that represents the best practices across Europe.

The following report describes the development of literacy and basic education in the Netherlands. Due to space limitations this report will focus on current projects that involve the professionalism of teachers and/or organisational changes that impact on the way in which teachers function.

The references used for this report were collected from the following sources: the internet, government documents, current publications on the topic of literacy, interviews with literacy teachers and interviews with current and former Dutch-as-a-second-language teachers.

## 2 Development of literacy and basic education in the Netherlands

Research indicates that 10% of the Dutch population, or 1.5 million adults between the ages of 16 and 65, are considered to have low levels of literacy. Set against the figures for illiteracy among other western nations the Dutch results are average. The statistics, however, paint a bleak portrait in terms of human capital. Given that the Netherlands is a knowledge-based society, low levels of literacy have grave social and economic consequences that require the immediate attention and action in the form of the 'Aanvalsplan Laagletterdheid'.

The 'Aanvalsplan Laaggeletterdheid' or 'Plan of attack against low literacy' (henceforth 'Plan of attack') is a country-wide campaign developed to prevent among school-aged children and to combat illiteracy and low levels of literacy among adults in the Netherlands. Launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2006, the 'Plan of attack' is being coordinated and developed by the organisation CINOP in close collaboration with the 'Stichting Lezen en Schrijven' or Reading and Writing Foundation and the 'Stichting Expertisecentrum ETV' or Centre of Expertise ETV Foundation. CINOP (Centre of Innovation for vocational and adult education) is a consulting firm rooted in vocational and adult education and provides consulting in the area of policy research, strategic planning, organisational change and the organising of teacher training programmes as well as the development of instruments for educational purposes.

The general aims of the ‘Plan of attack’ are to achieve, before 2010, the following six goals:

1. reduce the percentage of high school students who score below the PISA-level 1 from 11% to 10% (bearing in mind that the number of students for whom this applies will continue to grow in the coming years)
2. increase the private sector’s active participation in preventing illiteracy by 50% to 100%
3. orchestrate the creation of ‘Plans of attack’ at the provincial level as well as a number of ‘Plans of attack’ at the local level
4. assist in the implementation of ‘learning to read’ programs at the provincial and local level
5. increase the number of participants in literacy training to approximately 12 500 students annually
6. improve the effectiveness of the literacy plan by monitoring its progress, conducting research and collaborating internationally with partner organisations.

To achieve the goals stated in the general aims of the ‘Plan of attack’ CINOP has devised a series of ‘pijlers’ or thematic areas that consist of ‘clusters’ of projects to be completed before 2010. The thematic areas are listed below and include examples or types of related projects:

#### **1. Framework and language portfolios**

- Create a descriptive framework for Dutch as language of instruction and language of education (based on the Common European Framework for foreign languages) to assist in the development of language portfolios for language assessment.

#### **2. Language policy in pre-vocational and vocational colleges**

- Assist in the creation of language policies in vocational colleges to give reading and writing skills a more prominent role in vocational training.

#### **3. Competency training for teachers**

- Assist in the creation of competency training for teachers. This consists of, among others, understanding how languages are learned and developing competencies deemed necessary to deal effectively with and provide support for students with low levels of literacy.

#### **4. Research, evaluation and monitoring**

- Evaluate the projects on an annual basis to monitor and improve, where necessary, current projects and future plans.
- Conduct research in the field of literacy and literacy training.

#### **5. Communication, recruitment and awareness-raising**

- Launch the television series ‘Lees en Schijf!’ or ‘Read and Write Now!’ to raise awareness of courses and programs aimed at adults who are illiterate or have low levels of literacy.

#### **6. Employers**

- Encourage companies to send or give their employees courses in reading, writing and basic skills.
- Develop and distribute the ‘Tallkracht’ or ‘language power’ starter package to companies. The package is designed to encourage companies to raise awareness in the area of literacy and related issues.

## 7. Municipalities, provinces and adult basic education

- Assist municipalities in the developing of ‘Plans of attack’ at the local level.

## 8. Social organisations

- Develop courses for employees of social/welfare organisations so that they can detect potential literacy learners and encourage them to take reading and writing courses.

## 2.1 Overview of the development

The context of literacy and basic education in the Netherlands can be traced to four key events: the introduction of the ‘wet basiseducatie’ in 1987, the ‘wet educatie en beroepsonderwijs’ in 1996, the start of the ‘Plan of Action against illiteracy’ in 2002 and the launch of the ‘Plan of attack’ in 2006 respectively.

Prior to 1987 the teaching of reading and writing skills was given by volunteers who worked in loosely organised networks. Courses were given in community centres, elementary schools and in churches. The recognition that illiteracy is far-ranging and significant social and economic problem, however, led to the initial effort towards the professionalism of teachers.

Illiteracy, as well as issues related to illiteracy, earned political stage and resulted in passing the ‘wet basiseducatie’ or ‘basic education’ bill in 1987. The bill required that literacy teachers become qualified by taking courses. Funds for training were earmarked for a period of two years. Soon thereafter, however, political will and interest waned as energy and funding were redirected to second language learning projects for immigrants.

Renewed concern about illiteracy prompted the drawing of the ‘wet beroepseducatie’ or ‘vocational training’ bill in 1996. Cornerstones of the bill were the mergers of hundreds of vocational colleges into 40 regional ones and the acquisition of 40 basic adult education institutions spread nationally under the auspices of the regional colleges. Underlying the organisational change was the plan that colleges and institutions would combine efforts and resources. This would enable adult learners to make a smooth transition from basic adult education in the institutions to vocational training in the colleges to enter, or re-enter, the workforce. Despite the physical and organisational upheavals, however, the hoped-for collaboration did not materialise. It did, however, set the stage for the introduction of the ‘Action Plan’ in 2002.

The ‘Action Plan’ of 2002 saw the launch of several projects designed to reach out to illiterate adults. The projects were deemed successful but did not pertain to other target groups, namely adults and youth in compulsory education with low levels of literacy. This was deemed necessary as research in vocational education showed that young students’ Dutch language competencies deteriorate on a yearly basis. This alarming fact, combined with the relatively poor results of the ‘Plan of Action’ resulted in the ‘Plan of attack’ to target all citizens suffering from low levels of literacy.

As described earlier, the ‘Plan of Attack’ is a country-wide campaign aimed at preventing and combating illiteracy and low levels of literacy among Dutch youth in compulsory education and adults. One of the projects within the ‘Plan of attack’ is to help the basic educational institutions and vocational colleges collaborate on issues of literacy (including language teaching and development). This collaboration is considered vital as most citizens who are illiterate or have low levels of literacy are students, or potential students, of adult and/or vocational training. By working closely together they can help students gain both literacy and work skills to become contributing citizens in the labour market.

## 2.2 National policy, strategies and action plans

Underlying the historical development of literacy and basic education are policies, strategies and action plans to prevent low levels of literacy. For example, the government aims to prevent low levels of literacy by means of requiring vocational colleges to implement, as of 2010, 'kwalificatiestructuur' or 'qualification structures'. The 'structure profiles' consist of statements of the competencies, per vocational programme, that students are required to perform to acquire their vocational diplomas. The profiles contain language skills that correspond to language levels described in the Common European Framework. This will be described further in section 2.3. The individual colleges will be required to establish and implement means of testing that need to be approved by the 'KCE' or National Testing Organisation.

In addition, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, is planning on requiring teacher education institutions in primary education to test incoming student teachers' reading and writing skills. Remedial skills will be provided to students requiring help and all students will be tested again at the end of their first program year. Underlying this plan is the recognition that a high percentage of future primary teachers have low language abilities. By first helping student teachers to improve their own skills the hope is that the student teachers will be able to assist their future students in developing their language skills.

Finally, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is presently co-financing 'taal arrangementen' or 'language plans' in vocational colleges. A 'language plan' involves the devising, per college, a language policy. The language policy includes the training of language teachers and vocational trainers to: become aware of the importance of language, recognise language deficiencies and receive training to help improve students' language abilities. There are currently several 'language plans' underway which have resulted, in some instances, in the building of media/computer language centres and the creation of teacher competency profiles. Underlying the 'language plans' is the notion that giving language a central role in vocational colleges will result in an increased awareness of the importance of language among teachers and managers and the development of curriculum and teaching methods to prevent illiteracy and drop-out, improve low levels of literacy and increase student performance.

## 2.3 Structure and/or system of literacy and basic education

### Adult basic education

Before beginning a course in Adult basic education, aspiring students meet with advisors to assess their language and ambition levels. The advisors help the adult learners design programs that suit their needs. The programs specify the knowledge, learners' programs consist of statements pertaining to their beginning level as well as the knowledge and skills that the learners need to master at the end of the program.

Illiterate adult learners begin at Level 0 to gain reading, writing and/or numeracy skills. Once they have progressed to Level 3 the learners are deemed functionally literate and are at par with children aged 12 in terms of literacy and numeracy skills. At level 3 the learners can make the transition to vocational training and start at Level 1, the assistant level. A vocation that can be performed with a Level 1 diploma is a shop assistant.

### Vocational education

If learners – both adults and young students - aspire to follow a Level 2 vocational training to become, for example, a shop manager, they need to be literate according to the IALS norms. To ascertain whether or not learners have achieved the required language level they will be, as of 2010, required to take an exam at the end of their vocational training.

The compulsory testing is part of a series of measures that are designed, in part, to prevent

learners from graduating from vocational college with low levels of literacy. Other examples include the introduction of a competency profile or ‘kwalificatieprofiel’ for all vocations. The competency profile consists of statements of what the learners can perform at the end of their program. The competency profile also contains required language components. Each vocational qualification at each level has a corresponding CEF language level of at least B1 in speaking and listening in Dutch. This means that it will no longer be possible for a learner to receive a graduating diploma if he is, for example, talented in making wood carved furniture but does not fulfil the language requirements of his program.

## **2.4. Relevant bodies and providers**

Under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, CINOP was designated the responsibility of overseeing, coordinating, developing and implementing projects of the ‘Plan of attack’ in the area of vocational and adult education. In addition, several organisations at the national level are involved in the ‘Plan of attack’ including the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research that is responsible for overseeing primary, secondary and tertiary education. The most prominent bodies include: the testing firms CITO and Bureau ICE that design, among others, language tests; the ‘MBO Raad’ or Board of Vocational Education’ that represents the interests of the vocational colleges and advises the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research on relevant matters; the ‘KCE’ or Expertise Centre for Exams that certify and approve the exams and diplomas that are issued at the regional vocational colleges; and other organisations, such as ITTA and SLO, that provide consulting and training programmes at the national and local level. In terms of providers the 40 regional vocational colleges in the Netherlands serve in this capacity as do the 40 basic educational institutions within the vocational colleges.

## **3 Concept of teaching literacy and basic education**

A critical factor for success in reducing and combating illiteracy and low levels of literacy is the role of the teacher. The professionalism of literacy teachers is thus a vital component in the ‘Plan of attack’. The specific plans to professionalize the teachers will be described in the following section.

### **3.1 National strategy in the field of professionalism of literacy teachers**

Underlying the historical development of literacy and basic education outlined earlier are action plans to combat illiteracy. For example, the government aims to lower the number of semi-literate adults by means of financing the setting up of the ‘train the trainer for ambassadors’ and ‘course for guides’ courses as well as the launching of a digital literacy expertise centre and a digital community of practice for literacy teachers.

The ‘train the trainer for ambassadors’ course is a five-day seminar offered to literacy teachers so they can, in turn, train literacy ‘ambassadors’. Language ambassadors are previous literacy students who are prepared to go into communities and to approach potential course candidates. During the seminar the teachers learn how to instruct the ambassadors on how to, for example, present in public, approach candidates and plan for meetings. Five ‘train the trainer for ambassadors’ courses have been offered thus far to approximately 80 professionals and have received positive feedback from the literacy teachers and ambassadors alike.

The ‘course for guides’ is a course designed for professionals, such as librarians, who come into contact with semi-literate individuals. By offering them a course they can learn how to

advise potential literacy students on which courses, activities and resources are available to the students in the community. Plans to begin the course are slated for 2007.

The goal of creating a digital literacy expertise centre is to link all websites that are related to literacy under a central portal that will be managed by CINOP. This will enable all professionals involved in the 'Plan of attack' to keep abreast of developments in the field and to exchange knowledge and information. CINOP will also organise six theme meetings a year<sup>1</sup> for involved parties and organisations to share information and develop expertise.

### **3.2 Evolution of the literacy training programmes and overview of current teacher literacy training programmes**

As stated in section 2.1, the basic education law that was passed in 1987 required that literacy teachers receive professional certification. The program was of limited scope, however, and two years following its inception the funding for professional training was terminated. The alarming figures that conclude that 10% of Dutch adults have low levels of literacy, however, have brought new impetus for investing in teacher training.

One of the investments is the launch of a digital community of practice for literacy teachers to share pedagogy, methods and knowledge. The community of practice will also serve as a basis for research conducted by universities and teacher training colleges. The ultimate goal is to incorporate the collected knowledge into university and college courses for literacy teachers.

## **4 Review of literacy teachers' competences**

At present competency profiles are being developed for literacy teachers. The plan is to describe the knowledge and skills literacy teachers require to assist students in learning to read and write in 'can do' statements. It is hoped that by describing teacher competencies, a more structured and professional approach to teaching literacy will result. The competency profiles are slated for completion in 2007.

## **5 'Good practice' in the field of teacher training**

As the efforts to reintroduce the training of literacy teachers are still in their infancy it is not possible to report on 'good practices' in the field of teacher training. However, related courses such as the 'train-the-trainer for ambassadors' course offered to former literacy students to act as 'language ambassadors' and recruit potential functionally illiterate adult learners has been successful. Hard figures are not yet available but the 'language ambassadors' have reported enthusiastically on their ability to reach out and recruit future literacy students.

One of the plans within the 'Plan of attack', as mentioned in section 4., is to develop competency profiles for literacy teachers. This involves conducting research and collecting good practices of didactic models of teaching. Preliminary endeavours have resulted in a recent publication that contains examples of good practices in literacy teaching in the Netherlands.

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<sup>1</sup> The theme meetings will run until 2010, the end of the project.



## 6 Prevailing challenges and problems

Two key challenges have, until now, hindered the professionalism of literacy teachers. First and foremost is the lack of body of knowledge. The result of the bill in 1987 was that teachers were required to become certified literacy teachers. The subsidised courses that teachers then followed are no longer financed and thus do not exist any longer. Further, many of the then-qualified teachers have either retired or left the field. The departed teachers have taken with them a great source of knowledge, experience and expertise.

The disappearing body of knowledge and loss of teachers is exacerbated by the second challenge that literacy teaching remains a non recognized field of study. Several attempts have been made to introduce professional training into college and/or university programs to give literacy teaching similar status and recognition to first, second and foreign language teaching. Until now, however, progress on this front has not been forthcoming although a number of University courses in literacy teaching are available for students following Bachelor programs in the field of Applied Linguistics.

In addition, government decentralisation has resulted in adult education being financed by municipalities. Since national policies regarding literacy can no longer be imposed upon local governments, a uniform approach to providing literacy service to adults across the country no longer exists. This means that assistance to adults is provided piecemeal and divergent approaches to helping youth and adults exist nationwide.

Finally, the introduction of 'WIN', the bill concerned with the integration of immigrants, has seen a systematic decrease in the financing for literacy issues in favour of Dutch-as-a-second language courses in the last eight years.

## 7 Conclusions and recommendations

The 'Plan of attack' is in its infancy(2006 – 2010) and it is thus too early to draw conclusions on its outcome. However, based on the information collected thus far it is possible to make a few recommendations for countries aiming at launching similar campaigns.

The 'Plan of attack''s success, in terms of raising awareness and recruiting literacy students, can be partially attributed to its multi-faceted approach. The 'Plan of attack' projects vary in scope and range from offering courses to former literacy students to enlist future learners to changing the way in which education, and also language education and teaching, is delivered in the vocational colleges. Other examples of current projects that, due to lack of space did not get mentioned in this report, include: the launch of a nation-wide language television program 'Lees en Schrijf', the Dutch equivalent of the Irish 'Read and Write Now!'; the development of related course material and on-line language exercises; and the start of several research projects to monitor the results of the 'Plan of attack'.

Finally, the financial support provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has made it possible to launch a country-wide campaign and to bring many projects into existence. With the assistance and dedication of many individuals and organisations the hope is that many students will obtain higher competencies in reading and writing in Dutch and that many adults will be encouraged to take the first step towards becoming literate citizens in the Netherlands.

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## 9 Related internet sites

[www.basisvaardigheden.nl](http://www.basisvaardigheden.nl)

[www.ikbenambassadeur.nl](http://www.ikbenambassadeur.nl)

[www.cinop.nl](http://www.cinop.nl)

[www.stichtinglezen&schrijven.nl](http://www.stichtinglezen&schrijven.nl)

[www.leesenschrijf.nl](http://www.leesenschrijf.nl)

[www.alfabetisering.nl](http://www.alfabetisering.nl)

[www.infonedwerk-NT1.nl](http://www.infonedwerk-NT1.nl)